Silence

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Is it worse to suffer in protection of those you love, or to watch someone suffer to protect you? Leo, Don, Mike, and Raph struggle to recover from a horrifying captivity. Now completed!

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Introduction
Chapter 1
Chapter 2
Chapter 3
Chapter 4
Chapter 5
Chapter 6
Chapter 7
Chapter 8
Chapter 9
Chapter 10
Chapter 11
Chapter 12
Chapter 13
Epilogue

Chapter 1

Author's Note - My second story, already!

This one is darker than Alienation. A lot darker, a lot more hurt, and a ton more comfort. Go ahead and assume every bad thing but death will happen here, though most of the focus is on recovery. Again, no OCs, no girlfriends, no other mutants. My bad guy in this has a familiar name, but I'm doing an AU take on Bishop. I'm doing the mad-scientist angle without the whole long-lived alien aspect.

I think you'll hate him either way. Hope so, at least.

I'd also like to say a quick but heartfelt thanks to everyone who read and reviewed Alienation. It meant a LOT for me to know you enjoyed it. Helped me get it written as fast as I did. If you wanna keep it up, I wouldn't argue.

Now! Here's a prologue and I'll see you all tomorrow for chapter one!

They had given up.

Leo knew it, like a cold weight in his empty gut. His brothers were without hope, and he had none left to loan them. If Bishop returned they would talk. They would talk, sing, do anything the man asked for. Anything.

They were defeated. And in the end it wasn't threats or violence. It wasn't their missing brother or fear of what was happening to him.

In the end, it was the silence that defeated them.

Leonardo couldn't muster the energy to voice the thoughts out loud, which in itself was a black and bitter irony. Now that they were willing to speak, they couldn't. Not even to each other. They didn't have the strength.

Besides, after weeks of silence, what was there to say?

They just sat, staring with blank eyes across the small room.

Leo's gaze took in both Mike and Don, but he didn't really see them anymore. He couldn't. He couldn't let himself see the light gone from Mike's eyes, or the harrowed circles Bishop had put there. He couldn't see the blank, thoughtless expression on Don's face, so completely alien and unwelcome.

He figured his own utter mute helplessness wasn't something they focused on much either.

They were done in by the cold, pulsing silence. Abandoned to it. No longer hungry, no longer scared or tense or anything. They were done. Lost.

Leo no longer had any hope that anyone would find them there and lead them back.

It was six days since their captors last paid them a visit. Six days since they last ate. Six days of nothing. Of wondering. Fear.

Three days since the water ran out. Fear had spiked into terror then, but terror faded into hopelessness fast and hard.

Had Bishop left them to die? It seemed that way. Maybe he'd given up his project. Maybe he was found out and had to escape. Maybe something new caught his eye and he simply forgot about them.

Since it hurt to even think about Raph, Leo didn't anymore. Six days since their last meal, but how many since Raph had been taken that last time? How long had they been there? None of them counted anymore.

Two days since Leo's stomach last growled. Yesterday he'd felt a burn, like acid in his gut eating away at him, but today even that was

gone. He knew in his mind that it took longer than six days to starve, but he almost wanted to believe the end would be soon.

He wanted to die with his brothers. That was the one dignity they had been granted.

All but one.

Hopelessness. He felt heavy and limp with it.

He was ready to die. Sad that he wouldn't know where Raph had been taken, and that he wouldn't see Splinter again, or April…or even Casey. But he was ready.

And so, of course, once the vow was made and the words were thought, they were made moot.

For the first time in six days, the door opened.

The door opened.

Leo had told himself it was all he was waiting for to turn hopelessness back to hope.

But it didn't feel like hope. It felt like nothing.

He couldn't muster the will to look at whoever came in. Not even when a familiar voice broke the silence that had become home to three brothers.

"Leonardo?"

Chapter 2

Author's Note - Thanks thanks a thousand times thanks for all the feedback so far. As I said in Alienation I'm new to writing TMNT, though it was the first fandom I ever loved way back in the day. It makes me all happy and shiny inside to know that the community here is so supportive. I want to answer you all individually, and I hope I'll get time to. Kind words should be met with, like, at least a personal thank you. But if it takes me a little while, it's only because I'm writing this story in my spare time, not 'cause I don't care.

Anyway, this is more darkness. In future chapters there will be a lot of flashbacks about how things came to end up here, and those will be less dark. And of course recovery will have bright moments. So it isn't a total bummer, honest.

"Thank God! I thought we'd never…guys?"

Leo heard the sounds like the distant hum of a TV. Interesting, maybe, but too far away to connect to him.

"Leo? Don? Mikey?"

Female. His mind supplied *April* , and his head turned in vague curiosity.

Red hair, pale skin. Huge brown eyes, and mouth open in slack shock.

He wondered what she was so alarmed at.

Then his mind sent him messages, making him realize what was happening.

April was there. The door was open.

It was time to go.

"Casey?" April's voice was jarring when she spoke next. No longer a distant television, but a friend with a name. A voice, loud in the small grey-walled room.

A shadow came up behind her, looming.

"Did you… *shit* ! Damn it. Guys, are you…"

Time to go, then.

Leo turned to his brothers.

Don was wide-eyed. Shocked. Mike looked at Leo with the same dull curiosity Leo felt.

Leo moved.

It was hard, slow. His legs were cramped from days of sitting, and weeks of being in the same four-walled closet. But he moved, slow and sore. To his brothers.

He couldn't speak, but he met their eyes one after the other, and he held out a shaking hand to them.

"Casey. Get Splinter." April spoke softly, her voice wavering.

Leo ignored her, looking to his brothers. All that mattered, if they were truly getting out, was making sure Don and Mikey were safe and they all made it together.

He heard footsteps from the door, and he turned, wide-eyed and tense.

She stopped where she was, staring, her eyes wet. "Leo? It's me."

He dismissed her, reaching to help Don to his feet.

Don was light, but Leo was weak, and it took a few long seconds of pulling, and bracing his own weight against a wall, to have Don on his feet.

Don sagged back, eyes on April.

Leo reached for Mike.

Mike just looked at him, worried. Leo had spent the last few weeks reading his brothers' faces as a way to communicate with each other, and so he saw the thoughts in Mike's head easily. Was it safe? Was it a trick? Was it even real?

Leo shrugged, trying to smile. Maybe dangerous, maybe a trick. Maybe they were insane. But whatever it was, it was different. And different had to be better.

Mike reached up and clasped his hand, then looked to Leo's side.

Don stood with arm outstretched, ready to help.

Mike took his hand in his other, and together they got him to his feet.

They stood for a moment. Leo took Don's other hand, and they stayed huddled together.

Whatever this was, Leo promised them with a look as strong as he could manage in his state, it would be the end of it. Whether they were free, or whether this was a trick. It was the end. They wouldn't be back in this room watching each other die slowly.

Mike squeezed his hand.

Don dipped his head, agreeing.

They released each other's hands, and turned to the door.

April moved forward a step, but stopped herself. She looked at them like they were ghosts, or strangers, or something other than what

she expected.

"Guys, we tried…we tried to get here sooner. They caught him. Bishop, I mean, and…" She swallowed and trailed off. "We've got the van. We're getting you home."

Home.

Leo felt Mike shiver beside him. He nodded, moving one slow, painful step forward.

Mike and Don stayed close on either side of him.

April turned away, her hands going to her eyes for a moment. Her shoulder hunched and shook, but she drew in a loud breath and straightened. "Come on," she said without looking back, her voice choked.

Leo looked around in curiosity when they moved out the door. A hallway, white and bland. There was a door across from theirs, open to an empty room. Down the hall was another open door, and it was there April moved.

They followed, helping each other, resting and looking around in distant surprise.

An odd realization, Leo thought with something like wryness. He was so close to dying in a room he knew nothing about. He didn't have the slightest idea where they actually were.

Casey appeared in the doorway before April. He was as pale as she was.

"Where's Splinter? I think they need help walking to--"

"April. Splinter's in…we found…" Casey's voice was choked.

Leo looked up at that, his feet stalling.

Raph.

It had to be.

He saw the grey shock on Casey's face and couldn't move. *Not dead* , he said to himself as loud and firm as any words spoken out loud.

Not dead. It wouldn't be fair.

Don nudged his arm, and he got moving again.

Casey and April waited for them, uncertain. Casey moved in at one point, as if to support one or two of them. But Leo looked at him when he came too close, and his face formed a warning.

Casey somehow understood it. He stopped, held his hands up, and backed away.

They left the hall and emerged in a wide, bright, open room. The glint of metal tables shone dully under the light, and like their cell there was no color present. White, black, chrome, and nothing else at all.

Mike stopped. Leo turned to him, and heard him whimper. Saw the sudden fear in his eyes.

He grasped Mike's hand, nudging Don.

This must have been the room. The one Mike had been brought to. The one Raph ended up…

Raph. Oh God.

If the thought hit all three of them at once he wouldn't have been surprised. The moment Leo thought it, Mike straightened and sucked in a breath, determination shining over his fear.

There was no time for alarm. Not with one of them missing.

They turned and looked around.

Leo saw brown fur at the same time Casey spoke.

"Hey, Splinter? We found the others."

Splinter.

Oh, God.

It came home to him as the achingly familiar body of their father and mentor turned to them.

Splinter.

Leo moved on stumbling feet, trying to meet him.

Splinter's eyes were dull, but they brightened a little to see the three of them there. He moved fast to meet them before they had to walk far.

"My sons."

God, that voice. Leo had heard it in his head for weeks. He reached out a hand, still yards from his father.

Splinter moved to grasp it, reaching them and nearly collapsing against them. Thin, furred arms held Leo tightly for a moment, before moving to his brothers.

Leo watched him, and reality was starting to make the beat of his confused thoughts pick up, faster and steadier.

April, Casey, Splinter. Rescue. There was no Bishop, none of his sneering guards. No one. Just their family and this large, sterile-looking room.

He glanced at where Splinter had been standing, where Casey now stood.

His heart stopped.

For the first time in weeks, noise came from his mouth.

"Raph," like the rasp of rice paper burning the inside of his throat. It sounded nothing like a voice.

But he didn't care. He moved a step away from his brothers and Splinter. He stared, sickness rising in him strong enough to cut off his breath.

There was a table, metal and surgical, gleaming under the lights. On the table was his missing brother.

Dead. He had to be dead. He was still and too pale, his coloring washed out nearly to grey. Hurt. All over, hurt. Dull purple and brown bruises splattered over the grey of his skin.

He was skeletal, his bulky arms and legs thinned until Leo could see bone at his wrists and in his legs. Bone he could never see on the broadest of his brothers before.

His eyeband was long gone, like the rest of them. His eyes were black, sunken even when shut.

But there were things on him. Diodes taped to his arms, his plastron. Tubes, wires. His ankles and wrists were bound by thick straps. His skin was sliced, gashes and tears everywhere, and his leg was shiny red through a thick gashed strip that looked as if…as if they'd cut him to peel the skin away just to see what was underneath.

Leo might have thrown up if there was anything in his body. Instead he just stumbled, drawn inexorably closer.

Then he saw something else wrong behind his brother's shoulder. Something uneven, or…

His shell.

Right behind his head, something was…a piece of it was…

Gone. Cut out. From his shoulder blade to the middle of his head, a thick section was missing. There were long lines, serrated marks. Left by…by knives or…

Like they just sawed it off.

He swayed, shutting his eyes against the sight of him.

Raphael.

A hand grasped his arm, and Leo blinked up at April. At the sight of her - human, dressed in white - he almost pushed away, almost tried to escape. But he didn't have the strength to do it fast, and by the time his body would listen his mind was telling him to stay.

He stared at her, wanting to ask something or say something, anything.

She reached out, wet lines down her face glittering. "I'm sorry we didn't find you sooner."

A faint whimper grabbed him before he could respond in any way. He turned, knowing that it was Don's voice whimpering, and found his brothers right behind him, casting sick eyes on the table.

He reached for them.

They went with him, and on his other side Splinter came up and moved. Family. Together, finally.

Raphael deserved so much more, but it was something.

Leo reached out when he was near enough, and his fingers hesitated over Raph's arm. He was scared to touch, to feel dead flesh.

He heard Mike breathe, ragged and broken, and shut his eyes. On wavering feet, with Mike's hand on his arm and Don close enough on

his other side that their elbows brushed, he mustered the courage to lay his hand on Raph's.

Cool. Dry.

Breath rasped, loud and sudden. Breath that didn't come from Mikey or Don.

Leo's eyes opened.

From the sunken darkness around Raph's eyes was a glitter of brown. A faint sound, like a hiss, and Leo flinched.

Raph. Trying to speak. Trying to look at them.

Alive.

The others realized a moment after he did, and though he stood silent and stared at his brother, Casey and April were suddenly talking back and forth, searching around them for something. Disturbing the silence.

Casey appeared at the table with a scalpel picked up from one of the tables around them, and he started sawing through the straps holding Raph to the table. The paleness was gone from his face, leaving red-cheeked determination.

Leo just touched his brothers hand, unsure whether to feel relieved or not. Across from him, holding Raph's other hand, Splinter's furred cheeks streaked with moisture, and he rasped quiet words towards Raphael.

Leo backed up suddenly, his fingers slipping from Raph's hand. He felt Don's shoulder bump as he went, and Mike's hand reached for him.

When he looked at them he saw what April had been so horrified by. He saw suddenly that they were as skeletal as Raph. Thin, huge-

eyed, gaunt. He looked down at his hands and saw the thinness of his own arms.

It had happened so gradually, right in front of him, that he hadn't noticed it in himself, or Don or Mike.

How long had they been there? And how…

He turned back to the table, watching with dry eyes and hitching breath as Casey and Splinter picked Raph's limp body off the table.

How had things ever come to this?

Chapter 3

Author's Note: From here out the story jumps back and forth, following their capture and captivity at the same time it follows their recovery. I'm trying to keep the jumps from being too confusing, but if you get confused reading it let me know and I'll add labels or something to make it clear as day.

Thanks to all of you!

"Oh, man!" Mikey slumped back in his seat and dropped his head, looking up in limp-necked contentment at the dark ceiling over their heads. "That was almost *pizza* it was so good."

Leo grinned. "Let's not get carried away." He finally pushed back from the table himself, stuffed and heavy and smiling.

He couldn't help but feel a little self-satisfaction at how relaxed they all were. How tired and sore and stuffed with decent Chinese takeout, and how happy.

Mike was lolling in his chair. Donnie was trying to make some order out of the chaos of overturned, torn and emptied boxes they'd ransacked for dinner.

But the best part came when Leo looked right across from him.

Raph was stubbornly attacking the last of the fried rice, unwilling to quit until his enemy was destroyed utterly. His eyes were bright, he'd been grinning and joking with Mikey all through dinner. And best of all…

They hadn't fought. Leo and Raph hadn't had an argument all damned day.

It had been an experiment in a new training exercise - hiding in the shadows and on rooftops was well and good when they were out at night, but how well could they move, and how far could they go without being seen, in the middle of the day?

Dangerous, Splinter had warned them. But they promised to take it seriously and be careful. They took only light gear, set out early, just after the last of the morning rush had taken New York to work that morning. They stealthed their way up the nearest rooftops…

And spent the entire rest of the day running. Racing, chasing each other. Playing tag, hide and seek. Leaping and climbing and diving from roof to roof, from shelter to shelter. The sun beat down on them, warming them thoroughly in a way no turtle could fail to appreciate.

As a practice session went it was disorganized and chaotic, and entirely successful. As a day spent with brothers, it had been the best Leo could remember in some time.

He kept order-giving to a minimum, which kept Raph off his back. And if Raph went off suddenly, now and then, on some wild divergent path that made the others have to chase him, it fit with the feel of the day well enough that Leo didn't bark at him for it.

Mikey got to spend an entire sunny day outside, laughing and having fun with his practice like the kid he so desperately wanted to be.

Donnie had spent an entire day out with his brothers, no computers distracting him, no research or books or problems occupying his mind. And he never once complained about it, or asked to go back.

Raph…

Leo couldn't get over it. Raph had jumped into the day with as much enthusiasm as Leo could have ever hoped for. There they were, late into the evening, and the vibrant grin on his face hadn't even faded.

It had to be a first. One whole day spent in the company of his brothers that didn't end in tension or sulking or rage.

Sometimes Leo thought Raph wasn't happy unless he was miserable and making everyone else miserable. Then came times like this, when he looked in his brother's eyes and saw just how much of a relief it was for him to be something besides miserable.

Leo felt downright smug, really. It had been his idea, his talking that persuaded Splinter to let them try it. And to top it all off, they'd been entirely successful. They saw parts of the city shining in sunlight they'd never seen before, and only once had they come close to being spotted. Only when a low-flying news chopper swung over their building.

Don had seen it coming and flashed a signal, and by the time the chopper was gone and Leo stuck his head out, even he couldn't see his brothers' hiding spots until he gave the clear sign and they emerged.

They'd be sore and aching tomorrow, but it was so worth it it wasn't even worth thinking about.

"Do you think I'll get tan?"

Mike's voice interrupted Leo's thoughts, pulling him from his self-congratulations.

Raph answered, sitting back in triumphant defeat of the last remaining side dish. "You wanna be tan?"

Mike looked down his arm, surveying his skin critically. "I'm pale."

"No, you're an idiot." Raph stood up, bopping Mike's head as he moved past.

Mike ignored him, of course. "What do you think will happen? You think we'll go really dark green? Or maybe get a little brown? I mean,

we spent hours out there! It's gotta have some kind of effect."

Don cleared his throat. "Actually…"

Mike looked over, eyes wide and hopeful.

Don hesitated, glanced at Leo and shrugged. "You do seem a little darker."

Mike beamed, jumping up and following Raph to the kitchen counter across the way. "Hah! Don says I'm darker."

Leo grinned at Donnie. "Had a whole speech, didn't you?"

Don shrugged, smiling. "Melanin and human skin and why they tan. But why let him down?"

Raph returned with Mike still trailing after him.

"--just mad 'cause once I'm all tan and buff I'll be the hot one. Not that I'm not the hot one already, but--"

"Thanks, Donnie. Really." Raph moved back to the table, dessert in hand. The restaurant had those fried donuts no one could ever say no too, and Raph had made sure to get a triple order. "You know, I spent just as much time in the sun as you did. If you get tan so do I."

Mike just waved a hand, unconcerned with that logic. "Maybe Don and Leo will. But you've got that aura of *evil grouch* around you, and I'm sure it deflected some of the sun's rays."

Raph fixed his eyes on Mike.

Mike held up his hands. "Kidding."

"Want to see a grouch?" Raph moved towards him.

"Uh. Guys?"

Leo raised an eyebrow, sitting where he was. He knew Mad Raph, and this wasn't it.

"I'll show you a grouch."

"Guys? A little help--"

Raph pounced, driving Mike back past the table into the living room.

Leo sighed and looked to Don. "Want to see if we can finish these off before they get back?"

Don eyed the platter of donuts. He grinned.

There was a thump from the living room, then a louder one.

"Hey! Guys! We have company!"

Company? Could only be one of two people.

Leo pushed away from the table, cheeks already crowded with sugary donuts. He grinned and waved hello when he saw April being enthusiastically greeted by Mikey.

She returned his smile, rolling her eyes as she pushed Mike off her arm. "I was just here two days ago."

Raph moved behind Mikey, swatting his head. "He's like a dog. No long-term memory about that kinda thing. Just gotta wag his tail whenever he can."

Mike turned to him with a growl.

Before they could start wrestling around and breaking things, Leo moved in. "What brings you down, April? Just visitting?"

"Actually, it's kind of serious. I think."

"Serious?" He pitched the word loudly so Raph and Mike would hear.

They glanced his way, and then proceeded to completely ignore him. Raph grabbed the end of Mikey's eyeband and yanked, and Mike tackled him as he fell.

Leo sighed. "Sorry. Come on back. Tell us what's going on."

She sent an amused look Mike and Raph's way as she followed him into the kitchen. "Someone's in a good mood," she said carefully.

Leo grinned back at his brothers, proud all over again. They were juvenile idiots, but they were his, and today had been too great to forget it. "Yeah. Let's hope it lasts a while."

Don's cheeks were puffed with food, and he'd taken Leo's challenge seriously - about a third of the platter was empty already. He waved with a sheepish grin as April came in.

She laughed. "Chinese again, huh? Hope you saved some of those for Splinter. Where is he?"

"In his room." Leo exchanged smiled with Don. "He said he wanted to meditate, but really he just hates when we order Chinese. Says it amplifies our already horrible table manners, or something."

She surveyed the havoc of boxes on the table. "I'm inclined to agree."

"So tell us what's up."

"Alright." She sat, and at Don's offer she took a donut. "You guys ever heard of a man named John Bishop? He used to work at NYU?"

Leo shook his head, but he knew she wasn't really asking him. It was Donnie who knew everything about everything.

Sure enough, his smile had faded and he nodded, swallowing before he answered. "He's a scientist. Biologist, fired a couple of years ago

from the university. He got caught doing a lot of rule-breaking; experimenting on animals, stealing chemicals. Things like that."

"That's the tip of the iceberg." April set her uneaten donut back down. "I looked him up earlier today. He's got a history of getting fired for rule-breaking. He caused cruelty organizations to protest three different companies, as well as NYU. He's got a bad, bad reputation. But he's a genius, and people keep hiring him."

Don nodded, thoughtful. "He published a bunch of papers maybe ten years ago, a line of research dealing with the connections between humans and animals. He had theories about closing the gap that were…revolutionary, for the time. A lot of people called him the next important Darwinist. Of course a lot of people thought he was nuts."

"Right. They hire him because he has a name and one of the sharpest minds in animal research today, but they fire him because he's never stopped his own lines of research. Wherever he works he picks up his own experiments right where he left them." April frowned. "Maybe five years ago he was fired from a think tank in Manhattan because they found a pile of chimpanzee carcasses buried outside his building."

Leo frowned. "Okay. Creepy guy. But science is kind of out of our area. Why are you bringing him up now?"

She sighed. "Because. I think he knows about you guys."

Splinter hadn't been in the room when April had first mentioned the name Bishop. He had been called in moments later, when Leonardo summoned them all into the kitchen to listen to her story.

Bishop was a man of science who had strayed from his path. As many intelligent men do, so did he. Carried away by his research, jumping to leaps in logic that facts couldn't possibly support, he began to think himself capable of accomplishing any goal.

His obsession, April told them, had always been animals. He worked on communicating, and became convinced he could train animals to speak as humans. But his practical work had nothing natural in it - he tortured creatures of every species. He introduced chemicals into their bodies, into the bodies of pregnant mothers he hoped might give birth to more evolved offspring.

He killed, tortured. Destroyed. Doing it in the name of science didn't for a moment excuse his crimes.

But the only thing about this man that Splinter truly feared was that he seemed to have knowledge of his sons.

April told them about a phone call she had received from Bishop himself. He asked her about reports of criminals telling police of strange green animal-men who had caught them.

The police dismissed such stories as lunacy, or the result of too many drugs. If they listened at all they thought simply that someone in a costume of some sort was playing superhero on their streets.

Bishop, though, heard these reports and became convinced that there actually were large, intelligent animals responsible.

"I guess because of his research," April said with a shrug, all eyes on her as she spoke. "He's sure that you exist, and he's sure that you're the link he can't find between animals and humans."

"He's kind of right, isn't he?" Michelangelo, voicing his thoughts without hesitation, as always. "We do exist, and we walk and talk and all that. We're kind of exactly what he's been hoping for."

"That's what worries me." She frowned at him, as serious as Splinter had ever seen her. She worried for them, it was clear, and that fact above any kindness or intelligence endeared her to Splinter.

"He's collected all kinds of sightings. He was asking me dates, names. Mostly about the stories I reported on myself, but he knows a

lot more. I think he's been paying attention for a while now."

"That's not good." Leonardo's eyes found Splinter, silently seeking guidance.

Splinter, thoughtful, kept his focus on April. "Did he speak to you about plans he has regarding my sons? Does he plan to search for them, or have any idea where they live?"

"Not that he said. But he's sharp - I mean, really, he's a genius. He's put too much together already. He knows you're turtles, he knows you fight. He's sure you speak, since the reports say as much. And he's obsessed."

She went on to tell them that Bishop did not officially work for anyone, and hadn't since being fired from a New York University research position. No one knew where he lived or what he did. He had quite literally disappeared from the public eye.

Splinter's instincts hackled discovering that. A madman who answered to someone was bad enough - one who answered to only himself was more dangerous times ten.

But his sons resolved to seek out Bishop, discover what his plans were. Not making themselves known, of course, but watching and determining if this man proved a threat to them.

It was only the next day when they left the safety of their sewer to find this man. And that was the last Splinter had seen of his sons for three months.

"Leonardo."

Leo blinked unfocused eyes and looked up.

Splinter stood, regarding him with the same sad, caring look he'd had on his face for the last two days.

Leo knew he wanted a smile or a word, something. So he cleared his sore throat. "Father."

Splinter's eyes softened that much more, but rather than responding his eyes went to the bed between them.

Raphael lay, still and silent. His eyes were closed - had been since they got him home and lay him in his own bed.

Leo saw the tray beside Splinter, and he blinked hard to focus his thoughts. The smell of the tea on the tray was now familiar - a weak blend Splinter gave them all many times a day to hydrate their parched bodies.

He swallowed and spoke quietly. "Let me help."

Splinter looked to him again, and nodded.

Leo slid himself onto Raph's bed, lifting his still brother's shoulders onto his lap. He tilted Raph's head up carefully.

Splinter sat at the other side of him. He lifted the tea, gingerly holding it up, tilting drops into Raph's mouth.

Raph's muscles tensed, almost imperceptible even to Leo. His throat worked with a rasping sound.

Splinter waited with slumped shoulders, and after a moment he tilted more tea into his son's mouth. He lifted a cloth to catch errant drops.

It was slow, silent, but after a while most of the cup was empty.

Splinter sat back, studying Raph's face as Leo studied Splinter.

Tired, Leo could see. Very tired, and bent with worry. Splinter would worry himself sick in a matter of days.

Leo's stomach stirred with guilt. It was his job to bear some of the burden for Splinter - he was the leader when it came to his brothers.

He was the responsible one, the right hand who took up when Splinter needed help.

But all he could do for the moment was speak, knowing that was enough to soothe Splinter's fears a little.

"Father."

Splinter looked at him.

Leo swallowed. His throat got dry fast. "I'm sorry."

Splinter's brows furrowed sharply. "Leonardo, after all these weeks without hearing my sons speak, I welcome anything you have to say. But I won't hear those words again, from you or any of your brothers. There is no fault to be claimed here."

Leo hesitated, wanting to argue. His fault for leading his brothers into a trap, for not being able to protect them from Bishop. For not getting them out.

But Splinter wouldn't stand for it, he knew. So he looked to Raph instead. "He won't wake up."

"He will. He is aware of us here. He will return." Splinter spoke quietly, with confidence. "You will all return to me. I place my faith in that."

Leo dropped his gaze to the bed.

"Tell me, Leonardo."

Leo hesitated. Tell him…

He knew what Splinter was asking. Tell him everything. Put a name to the demons that haunted them all, and so take the first step towards defeating them.

Facing demons enough to name them was a hard task, though. Leo wasn't ready for that.

"For me, Leonardo. For your brothers."

Splinter's soft voice might have been a thought in his mind, loud as thoughts tended to get in long silences. Leo drew in a breath, looked at his lap.

Raph's eyes showed a glimmer of brown. It was the closest he came to showing himself as awake and aware.

Leo found himself touching his brother, stroking a soothing hand down his arm, careful to avoid the many bandages that covered his wounds.

For Raphael, then.

He drew in a breath and looked up. Meeting Splinter's loving brown eyes, he spoke.

Chapter 4

Ambush.

The memory was so strong, so outraged in Leo's mind that it was the first thing he thought when his eyes blinked open.

It had been a set-up. Or else it was a brilliant guess by a man described by so many people as a genius.

Either way, the moment the four of them were on Bishop's property, the small almost suburban house that was listed to him, things had gone wrong. The feeling from the house had been off, but Leo kept them going towards it anyway.

Just to see, they'd told Splinter. Just to check it out, to see who it was they had to be so worried about.

But there had been a smell in the air, a sharp tang that rose from their feet, from pipes in the grass. Leo identified them as automatic sprinklers, obviously modified to spray something besides water.

He heard Don's guess, 'chloroform', then he collapsed.

Ambush.

He pried heavy eyes open and looked around. Small white room, one door, no windows. A small grate in the ground on the far wall.

His brothers. All of them, looking as if they'd been tossed in and still lay where they landed. A sprawl, Don half on top of Raph.

Leo lifted his head, blinked to clear swimming vision. He sat up unsteadily, fighting back dizziness. His hand rose to his temple and he groaned through the throbbing of a killer headache.

Mike stirred suddenly, muttering to himself and pushing blindly at Don's hand, fallen over his cheek.

Leo looked at the door, then back at his pile of brothers.

Bishop. Ambush. He had to think, and think fast.

They knew what Bishop wanted them for. They knew what he thought they were.

It had been April's last remark to them before she left. "If you get near him, don't let him know you're what he thinks you are."

Leo could hear Mike's answer in his head. "We're giant turtles. Ain't no hiding that."

But April was too grim to smile. "If he knows you really can talk he'll never let any of you get away. He'll never stop chasing you."

Leo made the choice then and there as Raph suddenly started coming to, scrabbling to identify the weight resting on his lower half.

He moved over to them, slow but recovering fast from whatever they'd been gassed with.

"Don't say anything," he said as softly as possible to his awakening brothers.

Raph, of course, immediately disobeyed him. "Leo? What's--"

"Ambush. Bishop."

Raph fell silent, sitting up fast and pushing Don off him as he scowled around the room.

Don groaned, blinking his eyes open and instantly covering his face. "What--"

"Quiet!" Leo looked at the door, but there was no movement. No sound. He has to trust they weren't being watched.

When he had three bewildered brothers sitting up and paying attention, he pointed towards the door, spoke Bishop's name so softly it was almost subvocalized. He met their eyes grimly. *Remember what April said* , he mouthed to them. *He can't know we talk. He can't know how intelligent we are.*

How intelligent some *of us are* , Mike mouthed back, shooting a look at Raph.

Raph, grimacing already, glared back at him.

Mike grinned.

Leo held up a hand, getting their attention. He raised his voice just enough to carry to them. "He'll dissect us and put us in shows for his scientist friends."

Mike's grin vanished.

Raph glowered at the door.

Leo was satisfied they would obey now.

He sat back, frowning thoughtfully. They had been walking on Bishop's property - surely he knew they could walk. They were wearing their bands and had been carrying their weapons, so he would know they were fighters, and trained enough to use what they carried.

But animals could be trained, and April said he was looking for speech. It was his holy grail.

And it was the last thing Leo and his brothers would ever give him.

Raph settled back against the wall, arms folding over his chest unhappily. Mike crowded in beside him, and Don moved in near Leo.

They sat, quiet. Waiting.

Mike got bored enough after a few minutes to start poking randomly at Raph's arm.

Raph shot him a dark look.

Mike smiled back. Poke poke.

Don rolled his eyes.

Poke. Poke poke.

Raph growled.

Mike grinned. *I like this no-talking thing* , his face seemed to shout as he looked over at Don and Leo.

Leo couldn't manage to smile back. He had too many unanswered questions. Too much was still uncertain about their situation.

Poke poke, and Raph reached out and grabbed Mike's wrist. His eyes were narrowed. *Don't have to talk to kick your ass* was the look he sent Mike's way.

Mike held up his free hand, palm out. Surrender.

Raph let him go.

Leo sighed and looked at the door, waiting.

How had Bishop set them up? Had he gone to April suspecting she knew more about them than she let slip in her reports? Had she given herself away somehow and made him suspect she would go to them?

Or had he contacted others besides her, hoping and planning that they would hear about it from someone?

He supposed it didn't matter. However he'd done it, it worked. They walked right into the trap.

Better Leo spend his time worrying about how to get them out.

He turned his attention to his brothers at the same moment the door actually opened.

They all looked over, mute and blank-faced.

A man stood - tall, dark hair shot through with silver. He was big, broader than Leo would have pictured a scientist. His eyes were vivid blue and shot with cold intensity.

Bishop. Leo knew without a shred of doubt.

He was flanked by a couple of younger men, dressed in matching white scrubs and holding guns in gloved hands.

Leo frowned at them.

"Good morning, gentlemen." Bishop looked around at the four of them.

They looked back, silent.

He cleared his throat. "I'm Dr. Bishop, and I've brought you here for a talk."

I'll bet you did, Leo thought to himself grimly.

The silence that followed seemed to make Bishop's back go straighter. "I apologize for the conditions you're in, but I'm not at all sure what special guests such as you might like. If there's anything you want, feel free to ask."

Leo shot his eyes towards his brothers.

None of them looked at all interested in speaking. Mike even had the faintest smile on his face, like he was enjoying watching the man fumble to get words from them.

Bishop's face was rapidly getting sour. "Let's not play coy here. I knew who and what you creatures are. I know what you can do. I know perfectly well that you're capable of talking. Trust me, your stay here will be much more pleasant if you simply speak up."

Mike's smile grew.

Leo nearly rolled his eyes. Leave it to Mikey to find the humor in this situation.

Bishop looked at them, slow and careful. "I'm not an impatient man, and turtles live very long lives. You're not going anywhere, my friends. It's best to cooperate."

The two behind Bishop were starting to shift on their feet, awkward. One of them, a little too close to Raph's feet, almost stepped on his leg.

Raph let out a sound, animalistic, like a growl. He snapped his jaws towards the man.

The man jumped back, aiming his revolver instantly at the threat.

Leo didn't look at Mikey, certain he'd burst out laughing if he did.

Bishop seemed annoyed by the disturbance. "Very well. I'll give you some time to consider it. Talk amongst yourselves. I'll be back in a matter of hours, and if you're not ready to speak then, I'm prepared to force the matter."

Bishop turned, chin in the air, and walked out of the room with as much dignity as possible.

Leo held up a hand as the door shut, and he frowned to hear only two sets of footsteps leading away. One of the men stayed behind at

the door. To listen, no doubt.

He looked at his brothers, but they all seemed to realize it as well. They stayed quiet.

So…what next? Bishop was prepared to act on his threats - Leo had no doubt about that. He was obsessed, and he had too many years of torturing animals under his belt for Leo not to take him seriously.

All that was left was to find a way out before the guy set into motion whatever sick plans he had.

He glanced over as movement caught his eye. Mikey's hand was extending towards Raph, slow and expectant.

When it was close enough, Raph growled and snapped his jaws again.

Mike jerked his hand back, bursting into giggles he instantly muffled.

Raph snickered quietly.

Leo glanced at Don, rolling his eyes. Don just shrugged, amusement glinting over his face.

None of them were worried. Not too much. Not yet.

But they should have been.

Leo cast his eyes down, catching on the gash in Raph's shell where Bishop had cut a piece out. He should have known from the start that things were going to go bad, and fast. He should have prepared them, instead of sitting around laughing.

"I've told you, my son, there is no blame to be placed here." Splinter's furred hand fell on his shoulder.

He hadn't even noticed Splinter moving around the bed. He just looked down at Raph's empty face and swallowed. "Hope for the best but prepare for the worst," he said, voice rasping. "Isn't that what you tell us?"

"In that situation, there could be no preparations. You might have berated your brothers for finding a moment of light in a dark place, but what good could come from that?"

Leo sighed.

Splinter's hand came up, resting lightly on his head. "You carry too many regrets. Don't let yourself drown in them."

"Yes, sensei." The automatic answer seemed easier than arguing.

"Leonardo, at times you are a leader of fighters. At other times you are simply one brother among three others. Remember that."

"Yes, sensei."

Splinter sighed, moving around to meet Leo's eyes. "You need peace, my son. Come. We will meditate together, seek for answers to the--"

"No, sensei."

Splinter's voice faltered. He hesitated, his eyes sharper on Leo suddenly.

Leo looked away from those eyes. Sincere in his refusal, but unwilling - unable, really - to explain himself to Splinter.

"Very well." Splinter's words were still gentle and patient. "Go on with your tale, then."

Leo shook his head. "There isn't…" He scrubbed at his eyes with his hand. "He returned hours later, as he promised. But what happened after…you'll have to ask Mikey."

"Michelangelo." Splinter looked to the doorway out of Raph's room, thoughtful.

"I can't tell you what…just that Bishop came back, and we were determined not to give him a thing. I didn't…" Leo's head bowed, his eyes shutting. His hand returned to blindly stroking Raph's arm.

"I didn't know he would take Mikey away."

The lair was too quiet. As quiet as it had been when Splinter was its lone occupant.

He kept himself busy to distract from the silence. He prepared endless cups of tea for his sons, small meals many times a day designed to give them their strength back slowly. He tended Raphael - healing wounds was something he had expected to have to do. He was comfortable in that role.

His other sons, though. He fed them, made them tea, and watched for signs of what ate at them, what kept them so silent in the days following their rescue.

Donatello kept to his own room. He spoke the most of the three of them, answering Splinter's soft greetings with rambling words about how much better he felt, rambling questions about his brothers.

But Splinter wasn't cheered by the words. They were too scattered and unfocused. Donatello, for all he spoke and ate and did what Splinter asked, worried his father terribly.

Because for all the time he spent shut in his room, his computer remained shut off. His books remained unopened And for one who had never been able to shut off his unquenchable need for knowledge and mental stimulus, those things alone set off alarms as loud as Leonardo's broken guilt, or…

Or Michelangelo.

It was to him that Splinter went that evening. Tea in hand, Leonardo's tale in his mind, Splinter went quietly into the dojo where Michelangelo had taken to spending the hours.

Michelangelo was his youngest son - there was no way of knowing the ages of his children, but Michelangelo was the youngest in mind. The most open and innocent.

The most devastated by darkness when he came upon it.

Splinter found him on the mats, doing a slow, rough version of one of the easier katas.

"Michelangelo."

The kata went on, unbalanced but determined.

"Come, you must drink."

His hands dropped, his body straightened. He looked around as he approached Splinter, troubled eyes on the weapons against the walls.

Splinter took it in with thoughtful concern. He wanted to be able to snap a finger and fix his boys, but since that was impossible he watched, listened. Looked for clues about the demons these last months had stirred in them.

He handed Michelangelo a cup, silent.

He took it and drank, slow and careful. His hands trembled, but not so badly that the tea spilled.

Splinter spoke when the drink was mostly down. "My son, I must ask a difficult favor of you."

Michelangelo's eyes came up, wide and shadowed.

"I must hear what happened."

Mike flinched.

Splinter reached out, touching his arm. "It's for your good that I ask."

Mike hesitated, but nodded. "I know," he said, his light voice still gravelly from disuse.

"Leonardo has told me some of it. He tells me that this…this *man* , Bishop…"

Mike shivered.

"He took you away from them for a time. Will you tell me?"

"I don't…"

"I know, my son. But you must."

Michelangelo swallowed, his eyes misted and unfocused. "Okay," he said finally, drawing in a breath as if to steel himself. His hands shook all the worse.

Splinter nearly stopped him. Of all his sons, Michelangelo's pain was most easily felt. So openly expressed, as he expressed all his other feelings without hesitation or embarrassment.

But he sat and said nothing.

He let Michelangelo talk.

Chapter 5

Being ambushed and kidnapped and shoved in a room waiting to be killed or threatened or maimed horribly wasn't supposed to be so…

So *boring* .

Mike sighed, loud and gusty, and recrossed his legs. He was getting cramps sitting still so long, and he scanned the room in sudden thought.

If he could get Raph to huddle up in the corner, and Leo and Don to kind of sit on each other's laps, he'd have enough room to do some push-ups.

He glanced at Leo and Don, then at Raph.

Mm. Probably not.

But Leo and Don were just sitting there, staring at the walls. Raph was moving around every ten seconds, cracking his knuckles and folding his arms and glaring at things.

Boring. He could've gotten all that at home.

Worst of all, he couldn't break the silence with a round of dirty limericks, or some truly ridiculously bad jokes. No room to break into a nice soft-shoe number. No paper to make airplanes.

He sighed and uncrossed his legs.

Raph shot him a glare.

Mike entertained himself by building up an entire silent conversation around that look.

Mikey, if you don't stop blowing so much air outta your body I'm going to sit on your chest until you deflate.

Aww, come on, Raph. I'm so bored.

And I'm so tired of listening to you whine, and since I'm an insecure hard-ass I gotta express myself by repeatedly threatening and/or hitting you.

You know, Mikey, the Chinese saying 'may you live in interesting times' is meant to be a curse.

What the hell is that supposed to mean, Donnie?

I wasn't talking to you, Raph. I was inserting some random arcane knowledge into the conversation to improve our level of discourse. What it means, Mikey, is--

It means that we should be happy to be bored, because when things get more interesting they'll also get much worse. If you weren't such juvenile toadstools you would understand that, and I wouldn't have to lead you around.

Come on, Leo. I knew that's what Donnie meant. I'm not stupid.

No one said you were stupid, Mikey. In fact, I must say that out of all of us you're the most intelligent by far.

Oh, I agree, Leo. But then he's also the most witty and clever. It's got to be exhausting for one turtle to do so much.

But Mikey can handle it, so get off his back. Hell, I wouldn't pick on him myself if I wasn't so jealous of how truly remarkable he is.

Mike sighed in contentment. He glanced at Raph and reached out, patting his arm sympathetically. Really, he could understand jealousy.

Raph pushed his hand away, glowering.

Mike grinned and sat back, drumming his fingers on his leg. Bored bored bored.

Bored.

Maybe this was how animals in zoos felt. Trapped in cages all their lives, with nothing to look at all day but sweaty kids and annoyed parents gaping at them.

Sad thought. He shook it away.

A weight prodded his ankle, and he looked up to realize his leg had been twitching and knocking against Leo's foot. He grinned in apology.

Leo shook his head, mouth tilting upwards. He gestured around the room.

Mike nodded his agreement. Too small. Too small to cram four big-ass turtles into, anyway.

Silly Bishop.

He grinned to himself, remembering Raph's little growl and snap routine. He twisted towards Raph, sticking a hand out.

Raph rolled his eyes, but obediently waited until Mike's hand was close enough, and snapped out at it.

Mike beamed, shaking with silent laughter. His brother was a genius. A grouchy, pissed-off and antisocial genius, but he was funny enough to make up for all that.

He reached out again.

Raph sighed and batted his hand away.

Mike frowned in disappointment. Too pissed to play. That was cool. He knew Raph's moods well, and--

Footsteps thudded down the hall suddenly.

Mike perked up. Excitement!

Leo's eyes went dead serious, and he looked at them sternly before the door opened.

Mike just grinned. They remembered what they had to do. Honestly, Leo worried too much. Sometimes he was so good at leading he made his brothers feel like he thought they were idiots.

That was what made Raph snap most of the time. The misconception that Leo ordered him around because he thought Raph incapable of doing things for himself. Of course, Mikey didn't think either of them realized that.

Mikey was brilliant, though. Not surprising that he saw things they didn't.

He looked up when the door opened. He made his expression carefully blank like the rest of his brothers, and they watched Bishop come in.

Bishop looked around at them. "Well?"

Mike blinked wide eyes. He heard Raph growl faintly, and had to bite back a grin when the guy he'd snapped at before tensed and backed up.

Genius.

"You have one last chance, beasts. Speak to me openly, or I will force your voices from your throats."

Beasts? Well, that was just rude.

"Very well." Bishop looked around, and his eyes stopped on Mikey.

Mike had to fight the urge to stick his tongue out.

"The one in the orange rag."

Huh. That was unexpected. Mike watched the two clowns with the guns come up to him. He stayed limp as they grabbed his arms.

His eyes went to Leo.

Leo was tense, his eyes showing surprise and uncertainty. Don was watching Mike in alarm.

On the other side, Raph was tense enough to jump at the guys with the guns.

But that would've given them away, and might've gotten them shot. So Mike didn't bother wondering where he was going. He just ducked his head away from the view of the three humans, and he sent a grin back at his brothers. Unworried, unbothered. That was Mikey.

Don was the only one who tried to smile back over his fear.

The door was shut behind them, and Mike's smile faded a bit. He faced forward, walking on his own between them. The guys had to have seen them walking already, so that couldn't be a surprise.

Bishop regarded him as they moved down a white corridor. "I suppose there's strength in numbers. Pack mentality, though turtles aren't a species given to it. I wonder how strong you are on your own."

Mike stifled the urge to roll his eyes. He watched bad TV shows that had scarier bad guys than some scientist who wanted to bring Disney movies to life or something.

That thought kept him walking.

Hell, maybe this would be bad. Maybe the guy would actually hurt him to get him to talk. But he could deal with it. He'd been hurt before.

He wasn't about to break. He knew that, at least. He was maybe a bit of a goof compared to his brothers, but that didn't mean he was weaker than them.

He wouldn't be the one to get them dissected and put in scientific textbooks.

His resolve lasted even after he was brought into a room - stark, cavernous. High-ceilinged, bright with fluorescent lighting and white walls.

There were wicked-looking steel tables. Machines. Tools lined up.

Scalpels. Drills.

Oh, man.

His resolve lasted through it, though.

It lasted even after he was strapped tightly to a table. Even after little wires had been stuck to him, his arms and his plastron and his head and legs.

Even after the first shocks went through him, searing and white. It only took a few before he couldn't even hear Bishop and his questions and demands anymore. It only took a little while before he forgot what could possibly be funny about any of this.

Bishop walked around him, making notes on charts and studying machines. Experiments, Mike's mind supplied in a tone so stark it could've been Raph or Leo speaking.

He remembered April's words about Bishop killing animals, injecting them with things. Hurting them in search of what he wanted.

The shocks burned, to the point that he could even smell a bitter phosphorous scent in the air. But what burned more was the thought that in Bishop's mind he was just one more animal in a cage to be poked and prodded until it gave up its secrets.

But his resolve held. He didn't speak.

He didn't even scream.

Not for hours.

But when he felt the grip of hands on his arms, and ground under his feet, and he looked around with bleary eyes to see them going back down the hallway that brought them there, he felt something in him give.

By the time he was dropped on the floor crowded by his three brothers, he had completely forgotten how to smile.

Splinter's head hung down, but he didn't say a word for a long time.

Mike wiped at his face, seeing the shivering in his hands with something like curiosity. Too thin. Too weak. It had to be why…

No, he couldn't think about that. Not with Splinter there.

He drew in a breath, and another. Deep and steadying.

"That's…all there is," he said finally, his voice uneven.

When Splinter looked up, Mike was struck by the look on his face. He had seen many an emotion on the old rat through the years, but this was the most rare.

This was rage, burning deep and dark and heated. The same rage he tried so hard to chase from Raph. He spoke so many times about anger being as great an enemy as Shredder, or anyone else they'd fought.

But it clogged Splinter then, making his entire body thrum with tension.

But even as Mike stared, the tension eased a little. Splinter reached for him.

"I know how painful memories can be, particularly fresh ones. You have my gratitude and my respect for speaking them aloud."

Mike nodded, something in him burning to hear Splinter speak of respect.

Splinter shook his head as if to clear it of unwanted emotions, and when he looked at Mike again his eyes were even. "But you must know that however strong you might have been, nothing about that day could have gone differently."

He'd worked it through in his mind enough times to know Splinter was right. In the long weeks after that day he'd had nothing but time, nothing but silence. Nothing to do but think about it.

He went willingly because his brothers would have gone up against guns, and they would have lost. And he had done nothing in that room to be ashamed of. He hadn't broken. He hadn't even bended, not enough to give Bishop what he wanted.

He had proven himself strong.

But it wasn't enough.

"I see you spending hours in here, and I fear you take the wrong lesson from what happened."

Mike frowned. He looked out at the dojo, the mats and tables, the weapons and weights.

He shook his head. "I'm not here because of what happened that day," he said slowly, trying to make the both of them understand.

"Then what drives you, my son? What makes you struggle so hard to do these exercises when your body hasn't had time yet to heal?"

Mike looked away from him, pain making his shoulders droop. "It's what happened afterwards," he said, voice barely above a whisper.

Splinter hesitated. His words shivered with stifled anger as he answered. "What more is there to tell?"

There was a soft knock on the door to the dojo.

Mike looked up, glad for a distraction.

Leo came in, slow and unsteady.

Mike forced himself not to look away. His brother looked awful, but they all did. He did as well. They would get better.

He told himself that again, firm.

They would get better.

Leo's words helped. "Raphael's awake."

Mike followed more slowly after Splinter, who was past Leo and going towards Raph's room in a flash.

Leo hung back, looking at Mike in concern.

Mike answered him silently, since it was easier after so much time. *I'm alright.*

No, you're not.

I will be , Mike amended silently. He managed a tiny, thin smile.

Leo just sighed. *Don't force it. Not for me.*

Mike nodded and let the smile drop.

They moved after Splinter towards Raph's room.

Splinter sat on the bed, holding Raph's hand.

Mike forced himself to look at his brother, and he did feel a little something like joy when he saw Raph's eyes open.

Open, but unfocused. Pointed towards Splinter, but Mike didn't think he was actually seeing him.

"--to be alright, my son. I give you my word." Splinter's voice was as unsteady as Mike could ever remember hearing it.

Raph's eyes moved from him to the door, to Leo and Mike.

Mike couldn't look when the blank gaze hit him. His gaze went to the floor.

When he looked back, Raph had turned away from all of them, looking silently at the wall.

Mike found himself grasping Leo's arm.

Raphael was a lot of things. Moody, strong-willed, stubborn. He had lows as dark as midnight, and rare highs that could shine from him like the blaze of the sun.

But he was never, ever blank. He was never nothing.

Not like he was right then.

Mike wiped his face and turned away, wondering what those blank eyes had seen.

Chapter 6

Maybe things would have gone differently if anyone but Mikey was taken first. Maybe he wouldn't have responded the way he did.

Raphael wasn't sure. All he knew was what he felt. And all he felt was fury.

It came in waves while Mikey was gone, as time ticked by beat after beat in the silent cell and there was no word, no return. Raph's mind had nothing to do but work. Speculate on where he was, what they were doing to him - what Raph hadn't even lifted a hand to prevent.

Leo and Don were having some silent conversation, probably about a way to get out of there. Raph ignored them, knowing they wouldn't do anything until they knew Mikey was safe.

If it had been Raph himself, things would have been different. If Don had gone first, maybe his quiet, solemn nature would have made the change less jarring. Less affecting.

He doubted it, but maybe.

If it were Leo, he would have come back hiding whatever they did to him. Covering up under stoicism. Brave for his brothers.

But the one they brought back after hours, the one they dropped on the floor, the one who fell where he landed and didn't move…

That was Mikey. Who didn't know how to hide a single thing.

Raph didn't attack - they were gone too fast, and he had to check Mike first. He had to know exactly what he was going to murder those bastards for.

Mike wasn't unconscious. His eyes were open, wide and stark, staring as Raph crawled over to him. His hand came out, jerky and

grasping, and Raph took it.

Mikey made a sound. A slight, nearly inaudible whimper. He was shivering worse the longer he lay there. His muscles jerked.

Electricity , Don mouthed when Raph noticed him and Leo on Mike's other side, checking their brother for any visible injuries.

Electricity.

Raph sat back, leaving Mike in better hands. Now he knew exactly what he would be killing for.

Mikey pushed up to sit, shuddering and avoiding their gazes, but at least up off the cool cement floor. He leaned against the wall, shut his eyes, and his shoulders rocked in a pained sob that he restrained.

Raph watched him, sitting close but not touching. He burned. Every second he had to look at Mike he burned hotter.

Mike had left them with a grin, his typical unflappable, cheerful self. He came back looking like he had never smiled a day in his life, and never would.

These guys would pay. Bishop would pay, and those idiots with the guns, hired muscle or whatever they were, they'd pay just as hard.

Raph sank into red, hazing thoughts for a long time.

When he pulled himself out again, it was because Mike's eyes were on him, silent and watching.

Raph leaned in to touch his arm.

Mike snapped his jaw towards Raph's hand, halfhearted and ungraceful.

Raph realized what he was doing - echoing that stupid move Raph had done earlier that made him laugh so much. He tried to grin, to feel some humor at it.

Mike offered a curl of his lip so slight it might have been Raph's imagination, but then he sank back and shut his eyes and breathed unevenly.

His little brother. The smiling idiot who never held a grudge, who let Raph slide by however cruel he was. Mikey, always trying to make them laugh, always talking like they were the kings of the world. Always wanting more, and certain that he'd have it someday. That they all would.

Jesus. Raph couldn't look at him. His vision was clouding under the emotions gathering in his gut.

He looked across at Leo and Don.

Don was watching Mike openly, fear in his eyes. Fear of what Mikey had gone through. What might happen to all of them. To Leo, the leader whose brain would have to get them out of this mess. To Don, who hesitated to hurt anyone or anything if it wasn't absolutely necessary.

Raph made the choice, as definite and instant as a lock clicking:

It wouldn't happen to Donny. It wouldn't happen to Leo. It sure as fucking hell wouldn't happen to Mike again.

If they came back wanting more, they had one choice about who to take.

He would see to that.

And they did see. When the door opened again, there was a large cardboard box slid into the room between them, and the two men

followed it.

"Which one you want?"

"Any but orange, he said."

Raph growled, looking right at the one he'd threatened earlier. He knew exactly what kind of punk that guy was - big man with a gun, no courage holding him up at all.

Just as he thought, the man looked to him at the sound of the growl. His eyes narrowed. "Let's get big red over there. He could use some calming down."

Raph got to his feet before they could pull him up. He breathed a silent sigh of relief as they gripped him by the arms and moved him towards the door.

A touch on his leg caught his eye, and he looked back over his shoulder as he went.

Mikey. His eyes were huge, terrified. He was shaking his head.

Raph met his brother's eyes and smirked, wide and unafraid. He was the tough one of the four, right? He was the one who jumped into things and never looked back or thought twice.

He was the one they should be taking.

It was right, so he didn't fight.

The door shut behind the men, leaving him in a corridor, high-ceilinged and white. He moved himself without guidance, though they still held him tightly. He was no one's foot-dragging prisoner. He had chosen this and he would walk into it proudly.

He took in their destination, white and medicinal, and he bit back a shiver of alarm. That alarm turned easily to rage - this was where

they kept Mikey for so long. Alone in this cold room. It was unnatural, keeping someone as warm as Mikey there.

He let them lead him to a table, and the only time he hesitated was when they pulled up the straps to bind him to the table. But he lay back, glaring out at them as they worked.

When Bishop appeared, Raph watched him closely.

"Well, you're bigger than the last one." Bishop moved to the table, surveying him up and down carefully. "The musculature on you creatures is amazing. You're very human in proportions. These legs are too long. They'd never fit inside your shell."

He moved around Raph, making little comments all along the way about muscle development and elongated bones. He spoke into a small digital recorder held close to his face as he walked.

He acted like nothing more than a scientist with the discovery of a lifetime.

At least, until he was done making his notes. He set the recorder down and faced Raphael.

"Now," he said firmly. "Let's not insult each other, creature. You are an amazing find, but I happen to know that you're even more amazing than you've shown yourselves to be so far. I *know* that you can speak. I've heard a great many reports on the matter. I have seen you move, and I've seen the things you carry with you. You're intelligent, and you've been raised to be as close to human as possible. I know you speak. Denying it is both ridiculous and dangerous for you."

Raph looked at him, eyebrows lofted but trying to stay as close to expressionless as he could.

Bishop moved closer. He spoke softer. Trying, Raph figured, to be relatable, but so stiff and cool that it was an impossible task. "I don't

think your friend liked very much what we did to get words from him. I regret having to resort to such means, but I must know the truth about you any way I can get it. Are you prepared to skip the unnecessary defiance and simply talk to me as one intelligent creature to another?"

Raph blinked.

Bishop sighed. "Very well. Mr. Sanders, if you would."

The same ass Raph had been snapping at all this time stalked up to the table. He held a fistful of wires with electrodes on the ends.

Electricity, Raph remembered Don saying about Mike.

He tensed, but lay still as Sanders began taping the electrodes to him. Electricity was nothing. He could handle it. He had to.

But before anyone could make like a Christmas tree and light him up, Bishop approached with his other hired gun. This man held a syringe in his hand.

He injected chemicals he stole from his worksites, April had said.

Raph's muscles tensed all over again. He pulled at his wrist, but the strap was solid and tight.

Bishop looked impassively down at him. "One word can end it. Keep that in mind." He noticed Raph's eyes on the approaching syringe. "Don't worry, that is a simple chemical agent I've given to many an animal. It has…interesting effects. Softens up the most strong, stubborn beast, yet there's no permanent harm done." He gestured the guy towards Raph. "As you will, Mr. Lau."

Raph swallowed as Lau approached and reached for his arm. He didn't speak, of course - didn't even think of it. But he was starting to get a little more worried about himself.

The injection was sharp but Lau obviously knew what he was doing. He found a vein easily, and flattened the depressor.

Raphael's arm lit up.

His body followed, as instant and complete as if the next beat of his heart had simply shot the chemical into every single vein.

Raph's skin caught on fire. Pain under his skin, everywhere, crawling as if he could scratch it out of him if he could have moved.

Wild, incoherent suddenly, he jerked and seized in the binds, trying to get free and run from the pain.

Bishop's interested stare was the last thing he was really aware of seeing, before Sanders flipped a switch and the electrodes strapped to him were activated.

"Mikey."

Mike slammed his fist one last time against the bag, hard enough to burn. He sagged against it, too weak and tired but sure he had to keep pushing himself.

Leo came in, more steady on his feet that day than he had been. "You okay?"

Mike snorted. "Just great." He pushed himself up and lifted his arms.

"Stop for a minute?"

He obeyed, turning his tired body to Leo. "What?"

Leo seemed more healthy. His cheeks were already fuller than they had been days ago. Mike figured he probably looked the same way - he ate seconds when Splinter brought him food. Determined to get strong again fast.

But Leo was still too timid. "I…I just wanted to see how you're doing. Really."

Mike gestured around the room. "I can't keep this up for more than an hour at a time. Does that sound right to you?"

Leo shrugged. "I haven't tried. I doubt I'd last half that."

"That's not the point."

Leo moved to the edge of the mat and dropped into a chair, heavy and graceless.

Mike hesitated, looking towards the bag. But he really was exhausted, and despite everything he couldn't keep from being worried about Leo's unshakeable sadness.

He dragged himself across the mat and thudded into the chair beside Leo. "What about you?"

"Hmm?" Leo focused his eyes, but didn't look at Mikey.

"You okay?"

Leo shrugged.

"That's no answer."

"You didn't exactly answer either," he said sharply.

Mike looked out at the mats. "If I knew I'd tell you."

Leo sighed. "Yeah."

"How's Raph?"

Leo slumped, elbows on his knees and face in his hands. "I don't know. He still won't say anything. He's worried about Donny, but he won't even mouth words to me asking about him. He just sits there."

"Don?" Mike sat up. "What's wrong with Don?"

"He hasn't gone to see him yet."

"What?"

Leo frowned straight ahead. "He won't go. If there's some reason, he won't tell me. He seems to be doing alright otherwise, he just…he won't go to Raph's room."

Mike fell silent, thoughtful.

It wasn't hard for him to figure out, really. He knew exactly why Don wouldn't go. It was the same thing that kept Mike in the dojo almost every waking hour. The same thing that was paralyzing Leo inside, though Leo responded to it different than his younger brothers did.

He wasn't sure what to say, though. Talking about it seemed strange. Talking about anything still seemed a little odd.

He stood up after a moment, and groaned at the protest from sore muscles. "I'll talk to him."

Leo didn't argue.

Mike moved to the door slowly, leaving his brother behind. Just the fact that Leo didn't ask what Mike was thinking, or offer to go with him, spoke a lot about how much Leo was still concealing.

But he had to focus on one brother at a time.

He found Don in his room, of course. Sitting with a book in front of him, though Mike was willing to bet the book hadn't been opened in some time.

Mike moved in through the open door with a feeble smile. "Hey."

Don smiled back. "Hey."

Mike had learned in a few long weeks in a tiny room to read Don's face better than he'd ever been able to before. He saw the trouble in Don's eyes, the little ticks of habit he'd gotten to know - an eyebrow that rose higher than the other when he talked. His habit of clicking his teeth when he felt uncomfortable.

"Raph's asking about you." Mike moved to sit on the bed beside Don.

Don looked away from him fast. "I hear he's not asking for much of anything."

"Not out loud, maybe." Mike spoke pointedly. "But since when do we have to do things out loud, anyway?"

Don didn't answer.

"I feel the same way you do," Mike said after a moment.

"Mikey, come on. You don't know how I--"

"Yeah. I do. I was there. I know what happened."

Don was tense, holding his spine stiff.

Mike studied his profile, then sighed. "Splinter keeps telling me to talk about it, but…"

Don swallowed. "Splinter wasn't there."

"Yeah. He wants to know why I'm working so hard. I can't explain it. But I don't have to explain to you, 'cause you already know. Don't you?"

Don looked over.

For a moment they were silent.

Mike reached out, touched his brother's arm.

Don inhaled, sharp and fast. Almost a sniffle. "I know," he confirmed finally.

Mike waited, but his quiet brother wasn't more forthcoming.

He let out a breath and shifted, hiking a leg up on the bed to face Don. "The second time they took Raph…"

Don knew. He had been there, and obviously knew just what Mike was talking about. But he listened.

Mike was glad. Because working through it out loud was going to help him as much as it would help Donny.

Chapter 7

Author's Notes - I promise I'll blanket you all with thanks when I have time. But hell, I've already got an idea for the story I'm writing next. It's so nice to be motivated. But it might be a while before I have time.

I keep hearing that this story is acting up for people. The link doesn't work and stuff? I have no idea what's up with that. If any of you who can read this are schooled up on this site and know if I'm doing something wrong, let me know, huh?

To answer a question I was asked in reviews, I do write these in my spare time. I work during the evening, so I write in the morning after all my email checks and whatnot are done. Then I take my little portable word processor (Alphasmart, ya'll. Seriously.) to work with me and write whenever I'm able to there. When I'm home for the night I give them a look-over for typos (a lot of which I still miss, I know) and then post them here.

That's it. Not a lot of planning, all in all. If you see mistakes, they're all my fault. I'm just impatient to put things out there once they're written down.

Now, since I'm sure none of you give a crap about my process (and really, calling it 'my process' just makes me sound pretentious and full of assholery), here's the story.

At first being trapped in a small room without being able to talk to each other was just boring.

Now? It was a form of torture all its own.

Mike sat, humming a random tune so softly it wouldn't carry to the door. He didn't even know if it carried to Raph.

Raph didn't give any sign if he heard it. He lay there, still and quiet.

Mike could have told him that he understood. He could have talked to him quietly about the sheer terror that physical pain could inspire. The mental blow that came from being entirely helpless, treated like a science experiment.

Pain was such an insidious thing. Mike used to think, before this, that torture was a dumb idea. He thought that once a person had been hurt too much, they simply grew immune to it.

Naïve of him, because the truth was exactly opposite. He had been hurt so badly that any threat of future pain filled him with terror. The idea of feeling again what he felt in that room ate at him, made him almost want to talk to Leo about going along with Bishop until they could get out.

If Mike was dragged back and strapped on that table again…

He would hold out. But God, it would be the hardest thing he'd ever done.

He didn't want to see Raph going through the same thing. He didn't want to think about the fact that when the door opened again it would be Don or Leo who would come back so ravaged.

He sat and hummed his tuneless melody, and told himself that Raph was strong enough to shake this off. They all would be, if they had to.

Mike looked up when he saw movement, and almost managed a smile.

The box the two goons had pushed into their space when they took Raph had been full of grass. Uprooted tufts of green grass, and a few leafy plates of green among them.

They had stared at it, confused, until Leo looked up at them suddenly and patted his stomach.

Mike had almost laughed. If Raph had been there, he would have.

This was a meal. Bishop apparently thought the turtles lived off plants.

They had left it alone, but now when Mike looked up he saw Leo picking through the grass and pulling out limp lettuce leaves. Leo made a face, but sighed and stretched some out to Don.

Don took them, held some out to Mike.

Mike crouched over Raph. He nearly asked if he was hungry, but clamped his mouth shut in time. Instead he held the leaves out and pantomimed.

Raph made a face and shook his head.

Mike sighed, but chomped on the plain green.

It figured, really. He hated salad.

The door opened.

He dropped the lettuce, his appetite gone in an instant. The two men, still dressed in white and armed with their guns, looking in on them. The one in front, the vaguely Asian-looking man, nodded at Mike.

They came in.

Mike backed against the wall, cold and petrified just like that. He had thought Leo or Don. Not himself. Not again.

Had he been close to breaking last time? And Bishop had sensed it?

He wanted to beg them to leave him with his brothers. He wanted to fight, to speak up.

Instead the two men were stopped before they could reach him.

A familiar growl rumbled, and Raph - who a minute ago couldn't lift his head without shaking - was suddenly on his feet.

The second man stuck the gun right into Raph's chest. "Relax, big boy. You'll get another turn sooner or--

Raph's hand came out, shoving at the gun.

The guy's arm knocked back, but the gun stayed tight in his grip. "You stupid overgrown lizard. You want me to shoot you?"

Raph stood facing him.

The guy snorted, but turned back to Mike. The moment he took a step forward Raph was in his face again, growling.

Mike realized in horror a moment later - Raph was protecting him.

Raph was trying to get them to take him again.

Mike was so shocked - *how could he want to go back to that place?* - that he sat stunned and watched.

Raph's growl got louder, and the guy finally glared at him. "Fine! You want to go back, you got it, red. Come on, Jay, we'll take this one again."

"Bishop said--"

"Red, orange, what fucking difference does it make? This guy's about to get on my last nerve. He wants to get hurt again, let him."

They grabbed Raph.

Mike sat up, pushing off the wall.

Too late. The cell was too small, and they were at the door and out before Mike could find his feet.

He sank back. His eyes stayed on the door for a long time.

Mike drew in a shaky breath and looked over at his brother.

Don's head was bowed. Surely he knew that Mike did understand after all.

Mike wasn't satisfied, though. He cleared his ragged throat and kept going.

"I keep thinking…was it me? Did Raph think I couldn't handle it?" He looked into the odd reflections on Don's black computer screen. "He would have been right if he thought that. What they did to me…"

Don's hand appeared on his shoulder.

Mike sighed. "I don't know if I could have gone through it again."

"You could."

Mike shook his head.

"You could," Don repeated, soft and stubborn. "You think we see you as weak?"

Mike shrugged. "I think Raph did. I think he looks at me like a kid he's gotta stand up for. And when I think about what he went through…" He swallowed. "When they brought him back that time he was…you saw."

Bishop had started making his obsessive incisions, and whatever else he'd done that they couldn't see Raph wouldn't say.

"I think he went through it because I'm not as strong as you guys." Mike shrugged. His fingers toyed with the bedspread under his hands. "And I didn't stop it. So…all I can do is make sure I'm not weak anymore. I can't give Raph any reason to ever put himself in front of me like that again. I'm not...it's not a fair trade."

"Mikey!"

Mike looked over. At least there was some heat in Don's voice at that. "I'm right. One life measured against one life…it's not fair to ask for someone to sacrifice like that."

"But…"

Mike met his eyes. "Don't argue with me. If you didn't feel the same thing you would be in there with Raph right now, talking him up about computers and science and other things he wouldn't care about. You'd be tending to him the way you always tend to all of us. But you're not. You're in here."

"And you're any better? Scaring Splinter by exhausting yourself every day?" Don's eyes flashed. "You don't exactly spend a lot of time with him either."

Mike didn't stand for that for a second. "At least he knows I'm alive. You haven't even gone to see him, to show him you're alright. Which, yeah, Donny, great way to handle it. Let him think maybe you're dead and we're not telling him. Maybe what he did for you was a waste. That's sure to help him race back to recovery. It's no wonder he's not talking up a storm."

Don stood up, wheeling to face the bed. "Listen, I don't need--"

"You need to see him!" Mike stood right after him. "You need to leave this room and stop suffocating yourself in silence because you think it's penance or something. We suffered through this for each other because we're a family, and the only way we'll get past it is by being a family."

Don's face was hard, his glare hot enough to come from Raph.

Mike looked back, his eyes steady. His stance open and ready.

"And what do you need to do, Mikey?"

They jumped, and both turned to face the doorway.

Leo stood there watching. He looked at Mike, his eyes distant.

Mike frowned. "At least I can admit what's wrong with me."

"Yeah? You admit to working out a lot. Do you also admit that you're scared to be your old self again?"

Mike tensed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means…listen to you. You sound like Raph. You've never been so defensive in your life." Leo moved in. "You don't smile, you don't laugh. You're trying to be hard or something, and it's not natural."

"So what about you, Leo? I'm not blind." Mike could feel his face heating, his stomach shifting uncomfortably. "You don't listen to Splinter. You don't meditate or so any of the things you used to spend hours doing. You haven't even picked up a sword since we got back!"

Leo shrugged, not rising to the bait. "Meditation means clearing the mind and embracing silence. I don't know if I'll ever want to…" He sighed.

Mike frowned, though, because he sure understood that sentiment. They had all spent weeks with nothing but their thoughts.

And thoughts were insidious. A mind might start off whispering thoughts, but after weeks they were worse than voices, scattered and shouting and unable to silence. Thoughts were invasive and unwelcome, and silence was a worse enemy than John Bishop.

Leo spoke after a moment, looking from one tense brother to the other. "We went through this a family, and we have to be a family to heal it. Mike was right about that. But…Raph went through so much of it alone, and we can't leave him to fix himself. Not when he did it for us."

Don's eyes only hardened.

They had asked Bishop, who apparently left wherever they were to sleep at night, which one they should bring in the next morning.

"As long as it's not this one again. How about the purple one?"

Raph heard those words though he hadn't heard anything else in hours. As if fate had granted him coherence just long enough to know what was coming.

They dragged him back, dumped him with his brothers, and Raph tried to focus his thoughts.

He was able to sit up - Bishop had been good at causing pain that left no real injuries. Must have perfected the technique after years of slaughtering lab rats and monkeys.

He sat up and mostly ignored his brothers. They were scared for him; that was so palpable he could breathe it in. But there was nothing they could do. Nothing but stay alive and as healthy as possible.

He hadn't lost his determination. Not through the fires in his skin, the shocks all over his body. The knives, the injections.

He hurt so badly he couldn't remember a time before pain, but he hadn't shaken his resolve.

Every fire lit in his skin was a fire his brothers were spared, and somehow that thought managed to be enough to keep him going.

So he waited. Sat against the wall, ignoring Mike's huge, scared eyes and Leo's solemn gaze, ignoring the ridiculous box of greenery they were swallowing down to keep up their strength.

He waited until they were asleep - amazing, but sleep could come even to a place like that, and after a while it became a gift to be enjoyed as long as possible.

Once they were all breathing deep and even, he moved.

Slow, painful, though every inch of his body felt like it was tearing with every movement. Slowly he crawled across the cement floor to Don's side.

He was hurt in more ways than he knew existed, but he was ninja. When he reached for Don's eyeband and tugged it centimeter by centimeter off his brother, Don didn't even stir.

He peeled his own limp red band off. Holding them both in his hands, he sat back.

His eyes went to Donny's face.

So unaware. Always unaware, their whole lives. Brilliant but so stupid about human nature, about evil. Naïve enough to think there were ways of dealing with the lowlifes they fought that didn't have to involve fighting.

Don took all life as valuable. He was so smart, and he knew so much. Raph figured that knowing every molecule that made up life in the world must've made those molecules seem sacred somehow.

Every time Donny fought someone, it bruised something in his mind. Every time he faced down a shithead holding an old lady's purse or trying to drag some girl down an alley, he was utterly disheartened that a person could act so callously.

Don wouldn't come out of a trip to the white room. Not with his sense of self intact.

Raph? He was hard and bitter and content with violence. He had nothing in his soul that wasn't bruised already. Nothing worth protecting.

But he dreaded the pain. He would have done anything in the world to get out of going back there. Bishop called it science, and claimed to simply be prying words from reluctant animals, but Raphael had no doubt - it was torture, and torture could break stronger wills than his.

He rubbed the purple of Don's band between his fingers. When he put that on he was sending himself back to that room, and that…

He could admit it with his brothers sleeping and no one to see it - it scared him. Terrified him so much he couldn't will his hands to move.

He looked from Don to Mike, sleeping restlessly, the crease between his eyes deep even unconscious.

He looked at Leo, huddled into himself, jerking with the restless ticks of bad dreams.

God, Leo. He couldn't stop the thoughts. *Leo, wake up. Please.*

He lifted the band to his eyes, but his hands shook so badly it took more than a couple of attempts to get it tied.

Leo, please. Donny. Mike. Someone wake up. Someone stop me from doing this.

He froze when Mike shifted. Just a bump against his arm was all it would take to rouse him.

He waited, frozen, until Mike's breathing evened out again.

His vision was cloudy, tinted at the edges with purple instead of the red he was used to. He felt an odd damp heat against his eyes.

He tied his band a fraction more tightly than usual, to fit Don's head. He leaned in, as careful slipping the band on as he had been removing Don's rightful one.

He looked over Don's form, his helpless, blurred gaze on Leo.

Please , he said, screamed, from inside his head. *Please catch me. Please stop me. Anyone.*

He would give everything for any one of his brothers, but that didn't stop the heat in his eyes from sliding down his face.

S omeone. Please. Save me.

Chapter 8

"It's his own fault."

Leo and Mike turned shocked eyes to their brother.

Don spoke, his expression so dark it didn't look right on his features. "I didn't ask him to do anything for me. I could have taken my turn. He had no right to…to saddle me with this…"

"Guilt," Mike supplied.

"Yes! It's not fair! If I had known…if I had just woken up earlier, I…"

He faltered, shutting his eyes against the image.

It was the memory he found hardest to shake. Waking up to the unpleasant surprise of men being in their cell. Watching Raph dragged between them, and seeing in a shock that drove sleep far away that Raph was wearing a purple band.

His band.

He had reached up and in horror tore the red band from his own face. Too late.

And he knew. Raph had heard their plans, and like he'd done for Mikey he took the punishment for himself.

But the worst thing about it, about all of it, was that a tiny part deep down inside of him was relieved. Scared of what had driven Mikey to blank frowns and Raph to huddled shudders, and *glad* to have missed his turn.

What did that make him? Worse than a coward. Worse than weak.

Unforgivable.

He hadn't gone a single moment since then without shame tearing at his mind.

Looking at his brothers, seeing images in his mind that hadn't faded in the last weeks, Don felt the shame twist into sudden spiked fury.

He moved suddenly. He broke past Leo and Mike and crossed the living room to a doorway he hadn't entered since returning home.

"You had no right!" His vision was cloudy but he knew Raph was in bed. Knew he hadn't left it yet.

His voice was loud, sharp. "You selfish jerk. You had no right to turn me into this."

Raph sat up when he came in. As if he couldn't understand the harsh words Don spoke, when he saw Don his face split in a smile.

Don ignored it. He marched to the bed, his hands clenched in tight fists. "You don't get to be a martyr, Raph." A hand unraveled to shoot an accusing finger at his brother. "No one said you had to--"

Raph reached out and grasped the pointing hand, looking at Don with bright relief in his eyes.

Don faltered. Moisture stabbed his eyes, and he shook his head. "You shouldn't have…why did you do that? God, Raph, why would you do that for me?"

Raph shrugged. Though he hadn't been in the cell for the last silent month or the horrible starving final week, Don could read his expression as easily as his other two brothers.

Because I had to.

Don looked past the strange light in Raph's eyes, to the uneven shell behind his head. His body was bandaged all over. No longer bruised, but still achingly thin. His leg was wrapped down the front with a

huge bandage. They'd skinned him, Don remembered. A strip of his leg, all the way up. Skinned like an *animal* .

He didn't realize he was sobbing until Raph's hand tugged him down. He fell onto the bed, and arms behind him circled his shoulders. Mike. And Leo stood over him, hand on Mike's shoulder.

Don buried himself against Raph, barely remembering to hold back and not aggravate his injuries. He spoke into Raph's shoulder, his voice strained.

"I'm sorry we couldn't help you." He looked down at Raph's arm and squeezed his eyes shut against the sight of injection marks and fading bruises.

Raph pulled away until Don was meeting his eyes. He summoned another smile, crooked and small.

You did help.

Don sniffled, wanting to disagree. He could have done more. He could have taken Raph's place. Mike was right - it wasn't worth it, causing Raph more pain just to spare himself any.

Raph hadn't given them a choice, though.

Maybe that was why Don couldn't resolve his guilt.

If he had given them a choice, Don could at least be certain whether he would have stood up and taken his own turn, or if he would have willingly let Raph go.

He would be sure how much he truly should despise himself and his own weakness.

Raph shook his head suddenly, as if reading the thoughts going through Don's head. He met his eyes, piercing with the kind of strength he never lost, even through the worst of it.

Don looked away from those eyes, turning to Mike and Leo. He scrubbed at his face.

Mike's hands, still on his shoulders, squeezed gently. He smiled.

Leo came around to sit on Raph's other side.

Don was a smart guy most of the time, but he was beginning to realize he really had been stupid to try and work through this all alone.

He was unconscious when they dropped him on the floor like a discarded bag of trash, and he didn't wake up for a long time.

Leo sat back as Don and Mike did what they could. Raph was bleeding this time, little wounds all over his skin and one wicked gash on his face. Don had made them strip off their face masks to wipe away the blood.

Then again, Don had already taken off the red one he woke up wearing and during Raph's absence ended up flinging it across the cell after some raging thought or another.

Don had invisible wounds now, Leo knew with a heavy feeling in his chest. Wounds to perfectly match every one inflicted on Raph that day.

In a way Raph's wounds were a good thing, though. They meant that he couldn't pretend to be one of his brothers again. It left no room for doubt, even in the minds of two stupid humans who couldn't tell them apart without their masks on.

Bishop was a scientist. Surely he could tell it was the same turtle the last three times. He must have marked him so there would be no more confusion.

Good.

Leo had to sit there, to face Don's helpless guilt about Raph going in his place. He had to watch Mikey worry. He had to…

Had to be there when they brought back his strong, forceful brother in worse shape time after time.

He understood Raph's thinking, but it was time for someone else to step up.

Leo would go next, no matter what. He owed Raph that. He would face whatever horrors were waiting, that Raph and Mike couldn't speak about.

He went to sleep resolved, listening to Raph's harsh breathing until he lolled into heavy, troubled dreams.

He woke up to the sound of gasping tears.

His eyes opened and he sat up at once, and found Mike huddled in the corner, hands over his face, rocking with sobs. Leo crawled awkwardly over to him.

Mike looked up when Leo touched him, and Leo was struck by how young and scared and innocent he sometimes managed to look.

What's wrong , he asked him silently.

Mike gestured out at the cell beyond.

Leo glanced back, and saw at once what it was.

Raph was gone again.

Don still slept against the wall. None of them had woken up for it. Those men had come back, and deliberately taken Raph again.

The only sign Raph had been back at all were red streaks on the cement floor.

Leo fell back against the wall beside Mike.

Mike looked at him, tears still traveling down his face, and wanted to know why.

But even if they could speak, there weren't words to answer him.

"But I do know why you did it." Leo spoke almost to himself, though he stood in the doorway looking at Raph.

Don and Mike had been talked into turning on the TV, sitting through one of the shows they watched back when things were still normal. Don needed time to work through his thoughts, but silence was poisonous, so the television would be good for him. Good for Mikey, too, to watch something he always loved so much.

But Leo felt drawn back to his still silent brother, and he shut the door behind him so he could talk to Raph alone.

He drew in a breath. "I know why you went instead of Mikey. And Don. They're…"

Raph met his eyes, nodded.

The young ones. Both innocent in ways their older brothers weren't.

Leo moved to the bed and sat. "I don't blame you for that. I…I'm grateful. For them. But."

Raph watched him, hollow-eyed but better now that he'd been eating for a few days.

Leo drew in a breath. "Why do it for me, too?"

Raph tilted his head.

"You know what I mean. You knew they were going to take Don. You could have told me somehow. I could have gone instead."

Raph seemed surprised by that.

Leo frowned. "I'm not innocent like they are, and you were already so hurt. I could have gone, Raph. I could have taken my turn."

Raph shook his head.

"Why not?"

Raph hesitated.

Leo dropped his eyes, his voice harsh. "Would you just talk to me? Just say something. Tell me why you'd keep me from it when you knew I could handle it."

When Raph didn't answer Leo looked up.

Raph pointed at Leo.

Leo grimaced. "Come on, Raph. I know you can talk. Just say it."

Raph's eyes shuttered. He pointed again, at Leo. At Leo's head.

"I don't know what you're saying."

Raph sighed, but pointed at his own temple and made a face. He pointed at Leo again, and waited.

The answer hit Leo fast, sinking into his gut like stone. "You wanted my head clear. So…what, so I could plan a way out of there?"

Raph sat back, satisfied.

"No. There had to..." Leo stood up. He backed away from the bed. "You're an idiot. It was a waste. I couldn't do it, Raph. I couldn't think of anything. After a while I didn't even try."

Raph frowned at him.

"Don't believe me? Since we came back here I've thought of ten different things we could have done. We should have tried…" He swallowed, his eyes burning. "We should have made an effort. I should have. I don't know why being there made it so hard to…to think of…"

Raph sat up again, holding out a hand.

But Leo didn't want to interpret any more gestures. He didn't want to face the brother he'd let down so badly.

He turned and left.

Chapter 9

"You think I don't realize what you're doing?"

Raph shifted his limp body on the table as much as he could. No spot was comfortable, but that was probably deliberate.

Bishop watched him, thoughtful. "I knew when I first saw you yesterday that you're the same creature I've had in here. Wearing a different color, but I am capable of telling the difference."

If Raph didn't know the pain that was coming, he would have smirked.

"You're giving yourself away, creature. You still feign being a dumb animal, but this self-sacrifice to protect those others…I see it for what it is. It reveals your intelligence and empathy."

Raph looked away from him, to the light panels stretched high over his head.

"I would imagine," Bishop went on, drawing out his words, "that to get you to speak, I'd simply have to bring another of those creatures in here and let you watch for a while."

Raph's eyes jerked back to him.

Bishop studied him, as if memorizing every little tremble and gesture. When he spoke his voice was thick with triumph. "You understand my words."

Raph hesitated. Don't speak, that was Leo's only fast, hard order. Dissection and scientific journals, and Bishop would never be happy using just him and letting the others go.

But maybe there was a way to stall him.

Raph drew in a breath, and he nodded.

Bishop's eyes flashed. "Yes, you understand me?"

He nodded again.

"And you're quite capable of speech."

He was tense all over, but he managed another nod, sharp.

Bishop stared at him expectantly.

Raph thought fast. He opened his mouth, formed a word, and let loose a rasping, wheezing sound that was nothing like speech.

His throat burned, and he fell into pained coughing. That part at least was genuine.

Bishop took the sound as triumph, as Raph was hoping he would. His face creased in a broad smile. "I see we may have gone overboard in our examinations. Lau, get water."

Raph settled back, hoping he hadn't just made a serious mistake. He was pretty sure he could lead Bishop on for a little while, anyway. And when he got back to the cell he could try to communicate what he was doing with the others and get their ideas.

"So you would sit through days of torment silently, but speak the moment I threaten another of your kind. I'm impressed, I must say."

Raph's eyes went back to Bishop.

Bishop smiled, but this smile had nothing of a proud scientist in it. It was the smile of a psychopath. "We will give you water, even food. I will even give you time to heal before I begin our conversations. But I warn you, if you're planning to fool me then I will bring one of those oversized beasts in here, and…" He paused.

Thoughtful, he studied Raph.

"No. I believe we'll make an example of you. You are undoubtedly strong-willed to have held out so long. Those others I suspect are not so strong, which is why you feel the need to protect them. If you decide to stay silent, we will continue our experiments until you lay here dead, and then we will throw you in your cell and let your friends live with your corpse. We will begin again with one of them, and I have very little doubt that they will talk enough to fill the pages of a book."

Raph had heard threats before. Lots of them. None of it made much impact. If he was killed, he would be dead. Simple as that. He hated the thought of his brothers dealing with it - they'd blame themselves. But he wouldn't be around anymore.

Bishop's next words did have an impact, though. A bolt that shot through the haze of pain and fear.

"And until then, I don't think we'll send you back to let them know about my plans. Get comfortable, creature. You'll be in this room for a while."

Right before they reached the door that slid open to reveal the lair, they paused.

April didn't speak, but drew in a breath and held it.

She was a coward for hesitating, she told herself. She'd been in there a thousand times. She knew what was through that door, and who was waiting on her.

But she couldn't do it. She couldn't go that last step.

They would understand. They probably wouldn't even notice. The way things were she wouldn't be anything but an interruption. A stranger.

The way things were…

Your fault.

She shut her eyes and backed up. "Let's go."

A hand appeared, broad and warm on her back. "April."

She shook her head. "Let's just go. They don't want me in there, and I can't…I'm not…not ready."

"April."

She drew in a breath and turned.

Casey always looked vulnerable without his mask on, with his hair off his face like it was that night. He seemed to be all eyes somehow, looking at her solemnly through the dim light of the sewer.

"I'm going in. I promised Leo. Leave if you want to, but they knew you'd be coming, and I'll tell them the truth."

She frowned, her shoulders squaring at what she instantly took as challenge.

He met her eyes, his own shining blue and concerned.

She looked away. It was a challenge, but rightfully.

His hand stayed on her back, solid support she needed. He flashed a faint smile. "Come on."

"Yeah." She breathed in, released the air slowly. She didn't want to do this. But she had to. "Yeah, okay."

"Good." He kept his hand where it was, as if he realized that she was likely to turn and run without it grounding her. And then he knocked his fist against the brick, and pushed the door open.

"Guys?"

April followed a moment after him, and she drew in a breath at the sight of the lair.

It seemed empty. It seemed cluttered and…unused at the same time, somehow. The air hung, undisturbed and thick enough that she felt her breathing get more labored. Her imagination, she supposed, but she moved heavily all the same.

"Guys?" Casey moved in, determined, shoulders back and ready for a fight, somehow.

April saw the shut doors around the lair. She held her breath, waiting. Hoping they would spring out to greet guests the way they always had. The way they had the day she started this disaster.

Casey went right up to a door and pounded. "Yo! You guys got company!"

April hung back in the living room, letting her fingers trail over the rough fabric of the arm of the old couch. There was a small tear in the seam, little bits of filling puffing out. She toyed with it, looking down so she wouldn't have to watch whoever answered Casey's call.

The creak of a wooden door broke the silence.

Casey spoke, loud and full of false cheer. 'Hey, man. Told you I'd be here. Where is everybody?"

"I don't know."

April winced. Leonardo. Rough-voiced and quiet, and she couldn't bring herself to look up. She remembered too well what he looked like when she found them. Green-skinned skeletons, all of them.

"Well, get 'em! I brought April to see everyone." Casey moved - April could hear his heavy footsteps. "Guys! Hey, there's a lady present! Get your shells out here!"

She flinched as he pounded another door, loud and hard. Why she had to go down there with the loudest, least subtle man in the world, she had no idea.

Casey acted like this was a social call.

It wasn't.

She came because she had to. She had to talk to them. She had to drop more heaviness on their shoulders. Upset things all over again.

To say she wasn't looking forward to it was understatement. She would rather have dropped dead on the floor where she stood.

"April?"

She flinched. Leo, standing close. "Hi," she said, her voice soft. "How…?"

"How what? April, are you alright?"

She drew in a breath and told herself she deserved to see what wrecks she'd made of her friends. She looked up.

Leo studied her, quiet and still.

She let out a breath.

He was better. Not well, of course, but he had obviously been eating and taking care to heal. He was closer to the Leo she knew than the walking skeleton from Bishop's cells.

She managed a smile. "Hi," she said again.

He smiled back, faint but a smile nonetheless. "I'm glad you came. They'll be happy to see you."

Her thoughts darkened - why should they be? - but she didn't let her smile fade. "How's everything going?"

He shrugged. "Slow." His eyes drifted to the right, to the closed door she knew led to Raphael's room. "Slow, but not impossible."

"If there's anything you need."

"I know. Come on, we'll find Mikey and Don."

Mike was in the dojo, so they gathered there. Splinter greeted her especially warmly - he had been very vocally appreciative of everything she did to find his sons. He didn't seem to care that it was her fault, her and her phone call with Bishop, her telling them about it, that caused them to get caught in the first place.

"Okay, guys." Casey, looking a little out of his depth with three solemn turtles and a rat watching him. "Uh. I'd like to tell ya this is just a visit, but April here's got some things to tell you about."

All eyes moved to April.

She drew in a breath. Best to get it out fast, she thought.

Still, it was one of the hardest things she'd ever done, looking her damaged friends in the eyes and speaking her next words.

"The police are letting Bishop go."

Chapter 10

Mike jumped at the sudden thump of the lock on the door. He and his brothers automatically turned to watch, hopeful.

He sagged a moment later. Just those gun-toting jerks and their fresh box of someone's garden. They pushed the box in, grabbed the old one, and took off.

Mike turned to Leo when the door was shut.

Leo looked away from his eyes.

Don curled up against the wall again, trying to sleep.

Mike wanted to shout. He wasn't sure he could, actually - it had been a good three weeks since he had said anything, and that was a long time. His throat might not even work anymore.

Still, he wanted to speak just to force his brothers to pay attention, to acknowledge what was happening.

Raph wasn't back.

They took him while they were sleeping one day, and they hadn't brought him back. The gunmen hadn't mentioned him when they brought food. There was just…nothing.

When Mike thought about it too long, he realized that Raph was probably dead. He'd been close enough to it as it was. Well…maybe not, since most of Bishop's experiments seemed designed to keep them alive and close to whole. So, not close to death, but weak and lifeless.

Maybe he was dead. If not, after this long in Bishop's hands, he probably wished he was.

Not fair. Not fair, just bring him back. Just let him see us. He needs us. We need him.

He wanted to scream at his brothers. To get up on his cramped legs and go kick Don's shell until he stopped sleeping the days away and started acknowledging what was happening.

He wanted to hit Leo until he figured out how to get them out.

He wanted them both to hurt, the way Mike had hurt. The way Raph was hurting, wherever he was.

But he didn't want it. Not at all.

He knew he didn't. He didn't want them to hurt, or to sit there staring back at him, sharing his helplessness.

He just…God, it was an entire month in one small room! He wanted anything other than the same.

He wanted to be reminded what Leo and Don's voices sounded like, because he was pretty sure he'd forgotten.

There were thumps outside the door. Mike looked up, hopeful all over again. Answered prayers?

Please?

Don sat up at once - not sleeping, then. Leo straightened against the wall, and they all looked at the door.

Mike growled when Bishop himself came in.

Leo didn't even give him a warning look. He sat looking like he wanted to growl too.

Bishop looked around at them, eyebrows raised. "You're not eating."

Mike kicked a foot out and knocked the box onto its side.

That time Leo did give him a look.

Mike didn't care.

Bishop seemed amused. "You know if you want a different kind of meal, you only have to tell me. You are getting rather thin eating nothing but greenery."

Mike looked away from him. Smug bastard. He doubted he'd ever hated anyone so much.

"All you need to do is tell me. Ask me for whatever you normally eat. Ask for a bigger room if you want one. Ask for beds, or a real bathroom." His eyes drifted to the grate they used, and his amusement grew. "Ask and I'll bring it."

Mike was too tempted. He had to squeeze his hands into fists to keep from speaking.

"Ask me where the fourth of your group is spending his nights these days. I'll tell you freely."

Mike looked at Leo instantly.

No. Leo met his eyes.

Bastard. Mike didn't mean it, though, so his look probably didn't carry the full effect. Still. He wanted to do it so badly.

"I could spare him, you know. If you wanted to say something on his behalf, I could leave my experiments and return him to you."

Mike shut his eyes tightly. *Don't listen. Don't listen.*

"I'll be honest - I'll return him to you either way. I made him a promise that once he was dead I would bring him back to his companions."

Don moaned softly, turning away from them.

Bishop looked at him instantly. He moved to Don's side, speaking with soft intensity. "You'll get to watch him rot day after day, and then I'll take another of you and begin it again. Which one will be left sharing a room with three dead creatures just like him? You?"

Mike growled.

Bishop turned away from Don, as Mike had hoped. "Speak to me, you stubborn beasts. Your friend in there had sense enough to trick me into thinking he would speak in time. By now, of course, I have seen through his trick and punished him accordingly, but it's not too late for him."

Just like that, Mike didn't care what Leo thought. He didn't wait for some plan to create itself. He thought of the day that Raph had stood up and taken Mike's place in that room, and he knew he couldn't let his brother suffer anymore.

He sat up, kept his eyes off Leo, and opened his mouth to speak.

But before he could get out a sound, Raphael spoke. As loud as if he were standing right there by Bishop, glaring down at his brother.

"You do it and everything they're doing to me is for nothing, Mikey." His voice sounded strong in Mike's mind, thick with the defiant strength he always had.

Mike shut his mouth, and shut his eyes, trying to see him as clearly as he heard him.

In his mind Raph was standing with feet apart, fists at his sides. Like every time he and Leo got into one of their fights. Bristling so much that Mike imagined if he touched him little cactus thorns would stick in his fingers.

He sat back, keeping his eyes closed to memorize Raphael's features. Just in case.

When he thought to open his eyes again, Bishop was gone. Don was laying down, Leo was sitting staring at nothing.

And they'd gone one more day without giving in.

"You're starting to tire me out," Don said, voice low as always as he watched Mike pounding the bag in the corner of the dojo.

Mike glanced back, eyes narrow.

Don sighed, dropping his hands and leaning against his bo. "It's been too long. I can't even…"

"Yes, you can." Mike spoke between punches. "You remember everything, and you're strong enough. If you tell yourself you're not you're going to be useless."

Don's eyebrows rose.

Leo finished his kata, holding the katana as level and steady as he ever had. He dropped the pose and rolled his shoulders with a grimace. "Mike, take it easy. We haven't been in here like you have. Muscle memory can only do so much."

Mike glowered at the bag, punching hard enough to make the thick chain grate against the stone ceiling.

Leo held out his katana in an opening pose, but before he could get started he dropped the pose. "Are we going to talk about this?"

Mike stopped his attack, turning to them. "About what? The fact that you're both finally in here because we're going to go after Bishop and give the bastard what he deserves?"

Leo hesitated, but shrugged. "Not how I was going to phrase it, but yeah."

"Why talk about it? He's free, after what he did to us. Nobody hurts us like that and gets away."

"Mike, relax." Don spoke softly. Mike seemed ready and willing to step into Raph's absent shoes, baiting Leo and being all-around belligerent. Strange that it should be Mikey to take that role, but Don thought he understood.

He moved to the chairs against the mat and sat. He really had gotten completely out of shape. "You heard what April said. The police won't hold him. He'll pay fines, but cruelty to animals isn't one of the NYPD's top priorities."

Mike's eyes flashed.

Don spoke mildly. "It's not like we can testify to try and get worse charges pinned on him."

"What that means," Leo said, "is that we can catch him again, but the police won't hold him. He'll pay his fines and go on being a genius at whatever university is still willing to hire him."

Mike cursed and turned to the bag.

"Which means he gets away with what he did to us, and to Raph."

Don looked at Leo, brow furrowed. His brother's voice was edged strangely.

Sure enough, Leo wasn't done. "Or it means we forget the police and end things ourselves."

Mike turned to him fast enough to stumble for balance.

Don watched Leo quietly.

Leo looked from one to the other. "Don't tell me you haven't thought it."

"Hell, yeah, I've thought it." Mike moved across the mats to them, wiping sweat from his brow. "I've had a few nice dreams about it."

Leo nodded. "Bishop hurts living things. He has for years, and he'll continue. Nothing stops him. He's proven that. Even if he forgets about us, which you know he won't, he'll just go on to take more lives. But the lives he takes aren't human, so humans don't give a damn."

Don frowned, looking away from his brothers.

"There's nothing else we can do. We have to find him, and we have to stop him. For good." Mike spoke with a strange hardness, and Don nearly flinched to hear it.

He wanted his comic-reading goofball brother back.

He wanted things to go back to how they were.

Nothing would go back to how it was with Bishop out there free and clear. They would never recover. They would live in resentment and fear, and it would only make these dark changes more pronounced as time went on.

He stood up. Their eyes were on him, and he realized they were waiting for him to decide on his own. He nodded, firm.

"Okay."

Mike crowed. Leo relaxed.

"My sons."

Silence fell instantly, and they turned to the door.

Splinter stood, leaning on his cane, watching. He'd obviously been there for more than a minute.

Don swallowed.

Splinter moved in, slow, his eyes searching from one to the other of them.

Don met his gaze. They hadn't said anything he would hide. He wasn't embarrassed, going along with Leo and Mike. It felt right to him.

Splinter cleared his throat. "I am worried about Raphael. He refuses to speak, though his strength returns. He seems to have no interest in leaving his room. His spirit fades, rather than grows stronger." His voice was as solemn as Don had ever heard. "I fear he's hiding something that gnaws at him, but if we're to bring it into the open it will take all of us."

Don hesitated, glancing at the others. Bishop stood between them and Splinter, a solid presence waiting to be addressed.

Splinter gestured them towards the door. "Your plans can wait for tomorrow."

He turned and went out first, leaving the three turtles looking from his back to each other, surprised and, grimly, glad.

Splinter agreed with them.

Bishop was a dead man.

He had begun to see the white light panels in his dreams, every time he shut his eyes.

Waking and sleeping blurred together. Always he was on his back in the same position, always he was in that room. As if Bishop wasn't enough, his mind wouldn't give him reprieve even in sleep.

Raph was sure he was losing his mind. He had no sense of time anymore. There was only Alone or In Pain. That was all he could use to determine one moment from the next.

It felt like longer than usual between one Pain and the next, though. Maybe Bishop was distracted by something else - *not one of them please not one of them* - and wouldn't bother him for a while.

But that seemed too hopeful to think of. Alone was so much better than In Pain that Raph didn't mind the emptiness in his gut, or the parched feeling growing stronger in his mouth. How long since he last ate, or sipped from a cup held up by Sanders or Lau?

It felt like a long, long time.

Mike had smiled at first when the silence was broken by one stomach or another rumbling loud enough to carry across the cell. Their last box of greens had been depleted, down to the last blade of grass, and sat on its side by the door. But it hadn't been replaced.

Not for days.

The water bottles the gunmen had set in every couple of days were nearly empty, which Mike knew worried Leo. Worried him, too.

And the grumbling stomachs weren't funny anymore.

Sleep was hard to come by these days. Even Don lay on his shell and stared with wide-open eyes most of the days.

Once he had a nightmare, something bad, but when he was tugged awake by his brothers his mouth had rasped strange hissing sounds before he could stop himself.

And Mike realized thinking about it later - he'd been trying to speak. Jarred from a dream that him forget their situation, he had spoken.

But all that came from an unused, dry throat were those sounds.

That was fine, though. He didn't want to speak anymore. There was nothing to say, and mustering up words would take energy he didn't

have.

Everything felt strange as the days kept ticking by. Mike was pretty sure he'd forgotten what Splinter looked like. The smell of pizza. The taste of anything. He couldn't remember. It was all part of his past, hazy.

Sometimes he thought he'd been born in that cell.

Sometimes he realized how stupid that was and laughed to himself about it.

Leo and Don didn't even look at him anymore when he made sounds. He laughed, sighed. They all did, and it wasn't worth notice anymore.

He glanced over at Leo one day and saw tears running down his face. But since Leo didn't even seem to notice Mike didn't bother paying it any mind.

Mike thought to himself that if the door ever opened and they ever saw the other side, the world would be too big for him to handle.

Chapter 11

Raph's small greeting smile faded as the room got more crowded. His bed was soon surrounded by his brothers and Splinter, and whatever he saw on their faces drove his smile away.

Leo stayed silent, waiting for Splinter to speak.

Splinter moved around the bed and sat by Raph. "My son. You know why we're here."

Raph looked around at them, his eyes wide. He nodded.

"We fear for you. This silence…it's unhealthy. It comes from an unhealthy place, and it must be conquered. We're here to help you fight that battle."

Raph turned his head, but if he wanted to look away from them there was nowhere to look. He was surrounded.

"Recovery is a slow process. I understand that time is required. But you…" Splinter reached out and lay his hand on Raph's forehead. "You, my strong son, have never been so slow to begin recovering."

Raph shook his head.

It was painful to watch him. Raph silent was like a completely different entity than the Raph Leo knew. Leo's Raph was loud-mouthed, argumentative. Stubborn.

He spoke, only because he couldn't stay silent. "We need to hear you, Raph."

Raph's eyes rose to him.

Leo met his gaze. "We need your voice around here. We're not ourselves without it."

Raph gave something like a smile.

Leo snorted. "I know, you'd think I'd be the last one asking to hear your smug little comments again."

Beside him, Don's mouth curled down. But Leo didn't bother apologizing. Raph and Leo were at odds so much of the time. When they had their good moments there was always that barbed edge present.

It's what Raph knew from Leo, and what he'd be comfortable with. Leo had no doubt.

And sure enough, Raph's smile grew a bit.

Mike reached for him. "Come on, Raph. We can help you. I promise. I mean, they've already helped me a lot, and I've helped them, and… you should let us…" He sniffled.

A fighter in the dojo, Leo thought to himself. But with his big brother he was still a kid.

Raph's smile faded and he put a hand over Mike's. There was regret in his eyes, but no words came.

"Can you not express to us somehow the reason for this silence?"

Raph turned to Splinter, but shook his head.

"Please, Raph." Don took up a turn. "We've been so worried about you for so long."

Raph's expression changed, shifted from sadness to contempt. For a moment Leo didn't understand, but he saw fast that the contempt was directed within.

Raph didn't think they should worry about him.

But why not? How could he come from such self-sacrifice with the idea that he didn't deserve his brothers' concern?

Leo drew in a breath as a possibility struck him.

Raph's eyes moved to him at the sound.

Leo knew his brother. Raphael wouldn't respond to trauma, not even this worst kind, by going mute. It wasn't his way. Something kept him silent, and knowing Raph, seeing his self-hatred…

Leo knew.

Raph seemed to read it in his face, and he bowed his head and shut his eyes. He nodded.

"Oh…" Leo breathed out.

Raph slumped, a hand coming to his hidden face.

Leo looked up with wide eyes at his confused brothers, and Splinter. "He…" His eyes went to his brother. "You spoke. You spoke to Bishop."

Raph nodded, but when Leo caught sight of his eyes he frowned, knowing that wasn't the whole story.

He was forgotten. Left to die and rot on the table.

His wrists were loose in the straps, but he didn't have the energy to try to pull free.

His throat burned. His eyes were so dry they stung when he opened them. His stomach had long ago stopped growling, didn't even burn with acid anymore.

He couldn't lift his head. He couldn't look around and see if Bishop was there. He thought he'd been left to die, but Bishop and his

experiments and his tests…there was a chance he was waiting, watching.

Just some water, Raph wanted to say. Water, please.

His body was eating itself alive, but thirst was eating at his mind. Making him fade in and out of blurry grey clouds.

He was beyond pain, and that was something good about the whole mess. He couldn't even feel the throbbing, sickening ache from his back, from where Lau had sawed at his shell.

He was mostly beyond his body, really. It seemed like a limp mass, not obeying his commands, not his body. Not connected to him, except that he was chained to it.

Thirsty. He was so thirsty. He couldn't get away from it. Water. Please.

Maybe that was death talking. Maybe he was ready to break free from it.

The notion struck him, half-formed as all his thoughts were by then. He could see himself rising up out of that room, like some ghost from one of Mikey's rotten horror movies.

Mikey.

He saw images of his brothers. Mikey's grinning face. Don's thoughtful, studious eyes. Leo's sense of dignity and proud authority.

He wondered if they ever really existed. Maybe he made them up to keep him company in that room.

He thought they were real, but when he tried he couldn't get his mind to stir up one single memory.

If he had something to drink…just a drop or two to soothe his mouth. Anything. He was thirsty. Didn't Bishop realize his experiment was

going too far? Why didn't he just bring water?

Water. Water. He couldn't stop his mind from stuttering the word. Water water.

Water.

"..ter, water, water…"

He drifted into his body enough to hear the sounds, scratchy and horrible. He spoke without thought, even after he remembered what speaking would lead to.

"Water. Water."

He was defeated.

Bishop had won.

Dissection. More experiments.

"Water, please, water."

He even raised his voice so if Bishop was there, there would be no denying that Raph had given up.

Broken.

"Water."

His brothers would be next. Cut open or put in cages. Examined. Displayed.

He had sold them to that fate, for nothing more than wanting a glass of water.

But he couldn't stop it. "Water water…"

Even when he realized he was broken. Even when he knew that he had murdered his brothers and made everything they went though completely worthless.

He couldn't stop. He spoke the word over and over, begging. Broken. And with every repetition he despised himself more. The sound of his voice grated at his ears, hateful to listen to.

He was broken, and Bishop would learn anything he wanted to know, and his brothers would live and die horribly.

All because of the sound of his voice.

Raph clutched at Leo's arm, his eyes dark and wide. *I'm sorry* , his expression read, loud as a scream. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Leo grasped his hand. *No* . "No. No, you're wrong. They didn't break you." Raph didn't have to speak the words aloud for Leo to hear them. "They didn't. Bishop wasn't there, he was in jail. And it wasn't him or any trick that did it."

Raph just shook his head, squeezing Leo's hand so tightly it hurt.

"Leonardo is right," Splinter said suddenly, moving closer to Raph on the bed, holding out his arms.

Raph dropped Leo's hand and fell into his father's grasp, shaking so hard he rocked them both.

"My son." Splinter's eyes shut, and his voice was soothing and sad. "My brave son. No man could break you completely. Don't you know that? Nothing less than death itself could break my Raphael, and only such a slow and painful death as that."

Raph made sounds against him. Not words, or attempts at words. Just loud, hoarse noises that his grief pushed out of him. Keening for everything he'd gone through. Everything he thought he lost.

Grieving, finally.

Leo blinked back his own tears, daring to hope this might be the beginning of a real recovery. For Raph, and for all of them. They needed to be whole, a family, and only then could they be whole as individuals.

He used to think it was the other way around.

A hand on his shoulder made him look back. He met Don's eyes, and saw Mikey at the door.

He nodded and pushed back from the bed, leaving Raph and Splinter to finish taking that first step.

Chapter 12

In the living room Mike sat on the couch, his expression harrowed.

Don and Leo sat on either side, silent and pensive.

"I'm trying to imagine…" Mike swallowed, clearing his throat. "What would it have been like to go through it all, but without you two there?"

Leo frowned.

"I hated you." Mike looked over, scared of the confession. "I hated both of you sometimes so badly I could have killed you myself. But it wasn't real. If either of you had gone away…"

Leo nodded.

In the cell it seemed like nothing was real in the world but the three of them. Now, outside and healing, it seemed like everything about that room was an illusion.

An experiment.

"He was…strapped there for weeks, dying. I can't…" Mike wiped his eyes. "Splinter told me he wants to hear me laugh again. How can anyone laugh, knowing something like that went on?"

It was Don who answered, his voice slow and thoughtful. "I just turned on my computer yesterday, for the first time since we got back."

Mike and Leo turned to him.

"Before…Bishop, I couldn't ever shut off my mind." He looked at them, thoughtful. "It's hard to explain. A lot of the things I read and the time I spend at the computer is because…I just couldn't turn off,

and I needed something there to let my brain work out. Sometimes it gets…got…so bad I couldn't just read a book. I had to read and run searches on the computer. If music was on, or I had someone there to hold a conversation with, even better. My thoughts get loud, and scattered." He hesitated.

Leo waited, patient. Don worked for his words slowly, but he always said things worth waiting for.

"In the cell it got bad. I'd lay there and there was nothing to listen to, nothing to read, nothing to focus on. And I think my mind rebelled. I found myself reciting the same line of poetry over and over and over again, unable to stop. Or going through words to those old Japanese songs Splinter would sing us. It got louder and I couldn't shut it off, and I thought…"

Leo reached out, lay his hand on Don't arm. "We all went a little nuts."

"Yeah." Don sighed. "But then it shut off. All at once. One day I was laying there listening to mind work itself in endless spirals, and by that night…it was quiet." He smiled faintly. "Like the time you kept turning up your music to torment Raph, and it got so loud you blew out the speakers. Everything went silent, with just a hum of white noise left in its place. You know?"

Mike scrubbed his eyes with his palms.

Don looked at the empty TV in front of the couch. "It was such a relief when everything stopped. When I got back here, I was terrified at the idea of turning it on again."

"But you did."

"Yesterday. I mean, just the computer, just for a while. Because trying to convince myself that I was happier in silence took as much energy as fighting those thoughts in the cell." He looked at Mike, his eyes solemn but steady.

"We are who we are, Mike. I can't shut off my need to feed my mind any more than you can shut off your humor and cheer. Laughing even though there are bad things in the world speaks well of you, not badly. Holding onto yourself, when so much conspires to turn you into something else…it's as brave as anything else we've ever done."

Mike seemed to listen to him.

Leo looked away from them, wondering what that meant for him.

"I keep thinking if Raph overheard us laughing about something it would…it would just seem so disrespectful."

Leo nodded to himself. Any amount of living when his brother was shut up in his own bed and mind and memories seemed wrong.

But Don answered, and he was as right as he always was. "If you ask Raph, he'd tell you nothing would make him happier to hear."

Mike drew in a ragged breath. "Yeah. He would, wouldn't he?"

Leo's eyes went to Raph's door. There were no sounds from the room, but he could picture Splinter still holding Raph, easing tears from the one of them who had never openly cried before that day.

Jarring, but not in the bad way Raph's behavior jarred since they returned home.

"You know, it's the same for you."

Leo looked back at his brothers. Don's eyes were on him.

He blinked. "What?"

"It's the same. No…in a lot of ways it's worse for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Going back to normal." Don shrugged. "You're our leader. We've always called you that, and we will now. And it's got to be killing you to take on responsibility for us right now."

Leo's eyes skirted away again.

At his side Mike nudged his arm. "We don't blame you, you know."

"Doesn't matter, does it? It's my fault."

"No. It isn't."

Leo ground his teeth, annoyed suddenly. "You just said yourself, it's my respon--"

"Leo."

Leo stood up. "Enough talking. We have plans to make, and this doesn't help anything."

"It does."

He snorted and moved around the couch towards the dojo. "Easy for you to say now, but you weren't so calm a few days ago, were you? Storming around yelling at Raph for taking your place."

"We're allowed to get angry." It was Mike who answered. From the sounds of soft steps they were right behind Leo, following him as he tried to escape. "Me, I'm taking it out on the punching bag. Don took it out on Raph - though in the most mellow Don-ish way possible."

Leo rolled his eyes, moving to take up his katana. He'd been training for a reason, and that reason still existed.

"When Mike hits the bag he feels better about things. I yelled at Raph, and I walked out feeling better somehow. Who gets better when you get so mad at yourself?"

"It's not about getting better, Donny. It's about owning up to what happened, and my part in it."

"Mmm."

Leo's eyes shifted to them as he got into position for a kata.

"Don't you think you're being a little selfish?"

Leo's pose slipped. "What?"

"Selfish. Hogging all the blame, as if your decisions were the only ones that mattered."

He turned a glower on Don. "How is this helping?"

"I mean, honestly." Don turned to Mike, as if looking for a second opinion. "I seem to remember us all talking together about Bishop, after April first suggested he knew about us. I don't remember Leo just walking in and ordering us around."

Mike's mouth was creased, trying to look thoughtful but somehow showing glimmers of the overly-expressive kid he'd always been. "You know, that's true. Man, what if we'd stopped Bishop in his tracks that day? I guess Leo would be back here taking all the credit, swaggering around like the king of the sewers."

"I guess. It's the same thing, after all. Either we do things as a team or he does things and we just follow along, carried in his wake."

"That's enough, guys." Leo set his katana on the table. "You don't understand--"

"Of course, even if it was his choice alone to go to Bishop's, the one we should really be blaming is Raph."

"Mm, just like you did earlier."

"See? I'm the smart one, after all. I can pin these things down."

"How the hell is it Raph's--"

Don talked right over Leo. "I mean, Raph didn't wait to get our thoughts. He didn't wait to hear the Word of God from our omnipotent leader. He went on his own and got himself all banged up. His fault."

"Nothing but a jerk," Mike agreed with a sage nod.

Leo's hands were fists. "Stop it."

"Then again, maybe we were all just pawns, and it's really April's fault."

"Hey, yeah! If she hadn't come down here that first day, none of this would have happened. It's all April's fault."

"Or maybe it's Splinter's fault, for keeping us here to begin with. He could've scooped us from our little puddle of ooze and taken us to some nice farm upstate. Maybe somewhere warm, down south. We wouldn't even know who John Bishop is if not for that rat."

Leo's spine stiffened sharply. "That's too far, Don."

Mike spoke fast, before Leo could move an inch. "Wait a minute. I have a really funky, really out-there idea. You're going to laugh at me."

"You're the funny one, you should be used to it."

Mike grinned at Don. "Right. So…forgive me if this sounds just totally cuckoo, but maybe the one who should get all the blame is Bishop."

Don blinked. He stepped back, surveying his brother critically. "You've lost it."

"I know. Sorry. Just a thought."

"Blame the guy who's actually at fault? That's crazy talk."

"I beg forgiveness."

Leo sighed, his anger draining out into the mats, leaving bent shoulders and bowed eyes. "I see what you're saying, guys. Really. It's just…"

"Just nothing." Don moved in, making Leo meet his gaze. "There's one man at fault for this. Maybe some things we did could have been done differently, but those things were because of April, Splinter, you, Raph. All of us. We all deserve the blame, and we'll damn well own up to our share of it."

"See, Leo…" Mike came up next, smiling in a way that reminded Leo of a time before Bishop. "Raph didn't want us to go through the pain, so he took it for himself. That was…hell, there's no words for what that was. But for all the good intentions and bravery and everything, it was selfish, too."

Leo frowned.

"Raph made a selfish choice. He went with Bishop because he didn't want to have to watch us suffer. He did it for himself, as much as for us. Because for Raph it's easier to be hurt than to watch other people hurt. He put the burden of watching on us, without asking us first. Selfish. And you."

Leo studied him, and looked past him to study Don.

Don picked up where Mikey stopped. "You're doing the same thing. Taking on all the blame insults us. We're not children who need you to guide our steps. We make our own choices, and we take the blame and credit when it needs assigning. You're our leader, Leo, but you're not some all-powerful god we submit to." He smiled faintly. "This isn't a dictatorship, it's a democracy. You don't get to hold on to all the pain. We're old enough and strong enough to bear our share."

Leo was so close to believing them.

A voice in his head, harsh and cold, told him he was just looking for an escape route. He was looking for a way to not be at fault, though he obviously was.

But that voice, petty and shallow and the worst of Leo's martyr side, was overruled by the stronger, louder voices of his brothers, and his own sense.

And then another voice spoke to drown it for good.

"They're right." Thin, low, but powerful enough to silence everything else.

They turned.

Raph stood, unsteady, leaning heavily on Splinter. On his feet.

Talking.

Leo wanted to smile, or call his brother's name, or cry. Everything at once, and he ended up doing nothing. Just staring.

"Hey!" Mike went to Raph's side at once, beaming, and took his weight off their smaller father.

Raph's eyes went to Mike long enough to return the smile, but they returned to Leo and stayed there. "They're right," he said again, in the sick rasp they'd all had when finding their voices after so long.

Leo saw the sincerity in Raph's eyes.

He wondered, sudden and bright, why during the truly horrible moments in life no one ever cried, and in the greatest bursts of joy it wasn't possible to laugh.

Raphael woke from dreamless sleep and looked up at dark ceilings. He lifted his head, and his hands moved when he willed them to.

He wasn't hungry. Wasn't thirsty. He hurt, but it was nothing like it had been.

He had spoken. Though his own voice disgusted him, he knew his brothers needed to hear it, and so he gave it to them.

Maybe he'd get used to it again.

He sat up, listening. The lair seemed quiet, but that wasn't unusual these days.

The day before he had walked - with help. He knew a large part of him wasn't healed. A large part of him remained in that white room. But.

But he was still him. He was still strong. He broke once, but he didn't have to stay broken.

He sure as hell wasn't going to stall out his recovery. He walked yesterday, with help. That just meant he would walk on his own today.

He swung his legs to the floor, sitting up, braving hands on either side of the mattress. He didn't feel weak, particularly, just… unpracticed.

He wondered idly if any of his muscles had withered, being in the same position for so long. If not for his shell he would have probably been left with bedsores, or blisters, or…

His shell.

He hesitated, but reached his hand back. He stared forward at his empty room, but focused on his fingers as they brushed behind his neck at the rounded, rough shell. As familiar as a limb. As familiar to him as the hand that touched it.

When his fingers reached a sudden gap, he shut his eyes. Touched the sharp, sawed edge of the shell, tracing down and back up the

line of the cut.

Sanders hadn't touched bone, which was the only reason why he was able to walk. But the saw had gone too deep, and the flesh under the missing shell was still tender and hot.

He dropped his hand and let out a slow breath.

He'd be alright. Shells were…they were like fingernails or something, right? It would grow back. It would take years, but…

"Raphael."

He looked up.

Splinter moved in through the open doorway. "Are you well?"

He shrugged.

Splinter looked at him sharply.

Raph cleared his throat. "I'm fine."

Splinter made a dubious sound in his throat. He approached the bed, and reached out to tough a finger to Raph's shell.

Raph bent his head, giving himself away too easily.

"You have come through these years with many battle scars. This is one more. A more obvious one, perhaps, but no more than that."

"He cut part of me away. So he could study it." Raph looked at Splinter, pleading silently. For what, he wasn't sure. Probably something no one in the world, even Splinter, was capable of giving him.

Raph remembered that day maybe more sharply than all the rest.

He'd been too weak to fight when they unfastened the straps and turned him over. Unable to move as his wrists were rebound, and Sander approached with a saw.

A giant fucking saw, like he was coming to cut firewood or something.

He had placed the saw to Raph's shell and just…just starting cutting.

Every movement of the blade felt like it was slicing into him. Driving deeper and deeper until…

Until he stepped back, and in his hand was a hard hunk of olive green, broader than his fist.

Raph had screamed. Not when Sanders was cutting, but when he saw a piece of himself in the human's hand. He screamed, hoarse and painful.

And when they tried to unstrap him to turn him back around he struggled so hard, with strength he hadn't had minutes before it, that they left him on his stomach overnight.

"Raphael."

He looked up, stark. "Donnie was right about me," he said, scratchy but determined to get the words out. "I went because I'm selfish. I couldn't stand the idea of watching them hurt. Instead…instead they had to watch me, and that hurt them as bad as whatever Bishop could've done. What does that make me?"

"A loving brother. Nothing less."

Raph shook his head.

Splinter sighed. "So many hard questions in the minds of all my sons. Your brothers understand your choice. Yes, they suffered because you suffered. But you have all returned to me, first in body and now in mind. It's the true test of a warrior - surviving the battle.

Perhaps your choice was good, perhaps it was bad. But it kept you all alive, and so it was right."

Raph met his father's eyes. "You believe that?"

"I wouldn't lie to you."

"I know. But…"

Splinter smiled. He reached out, the backs of furred fingers brushing under Raph's eyes. "Survive, and regain your strength. Wake up every day knowing you are alive, and your brothers are safe. Then you'll know you did what was best."

Raph hesitated. He nodded, but as he looked at Splinter a question rose in his mind. He swallowed to coat his dry throat before he gave it voice.

"What would you have done?"

Splinter flinched too fast - it was something he had thought about, Raph could tell. His eyes didn't move from Raph's gaze, but he gave the question the thought it deserved.

When he spoke his voice was rough. "I have always considered Leonardo to be, of the four of you, closest in behavior to me. He has the discipline and the hunger that I have always had, for perfection and enlightenment. But in this…" He let his hand drop from Raph's face to lay over his hand. "In this I am very much like you. I would have died, gladly, before those creatures would have ever touched my sons."

Something in Raphael seemed to ease with Splinter's answer.

Splinter dropped his hand. "Now. Are you able to come out to the kitchen and drink some tea?"

Raph pushed to his feet. He swayed a bit, but stretched himself out gingerly. "All respect, sensei, but I'm really sick of tea."

Splinter chuckled and led him to the door.

Raph moved on his own, though he knew Splinter was watching and ready to jump to his side the moment he faltered.

But Raph didn't plan to falter.

When they came out to the living room, the silence of the lair held out.

Raph blinked, looking around. Don's door was open. The dojo door was open. Just, no one in sight. "Where is everybody?"

Splinter hesitated a half step, but continued to the kitchen.

Raph faltered. "Sensei. Where is everybody?"

"Come, Raphael. You're not yet ready to be--"

"Splinter?"

The rat sighed and stopped. He turned. "They have gone."

"Where?" Raph stood straight, willing himself not to sway, and fisted his hands. There had been too many talks through the lair that he hadn't heard. Too much time, too much news.

Splinter studied him. "This man, Bishop. The police were unable to hold him for any crime."

"They're going to find him." Bishop's name caused a jolt of fear, but Raph had to focus on his brothers.

Splinter moved to him. "Raphael. You are weak and have not yet taken more than the first steps to recovery. Your spirit cannot be dealt another blow so soon. And the taking of a life, however wretched, is a blow that--"

"They're going to *kill* him." Raph backed up, shaking his head. "When…where did…"

"Please, my son--"

"Where are they?"

Chapter 13

It was arrogance or stupidity that made John Bishop return to the house he'd been staying in before his arrest.

Overconfidence, probably.

Don knew it didn't matter. All that mattered was that they had found him, and found him easily.

It almost felt anticlimactic, standing in the shadows of the street, looking at the house with lights in the windows and someone moving around inside.

"A trap?" Mike asked, looking to his brothers.

Leo kept his eyes sharp on the house. "Maybe. Maybe he thinks we're dead, or still close enough to dead that we're no threat."

Don smiled humorlessly. "Maybe he's come to think we really were dumb animals."

Leo tilted his head, but didn't seem to agree.

"So what's the plan?"

"Yeah, guys. What's the plan?"

Don jumped and twisted around. "What are you doing here?"

Casey shrugged, sliding the mask up off his face. "Come on. I knew the day you found out this toad was out of prison you'd be coming down. Besides, someone had to keep an eye on him and make sure he didn't pick up any of the neighborhood kitties and set them on fire while you guys were getting into practice again."

Mike flashed a smile, but Leo shook his head.

"Thanks, Casey, but this is our battle."

"Hell it is." He grinned his cock-eyed smile, hefting his bat.

"Casey, I'm serious."

"I'm out here for tickles?"

Leo glanced at his brothers.

Don frowned, but didn't say anything. Casey was a friend, and they were already down to three without Raph.

But this was very much a personal thing.

Don left the choice to Leo, turning his gaze back on the house.

"Look, if you really want to help us you'll go back and make sure Raph doesn't find out where we are."

"All respect, Leo, you ain't the boss of me. I been biding my time for weeks now so you could be involved when I stopped this guy, but--"

"Be involved?"

Don sighed. *Wrong thing to say, Casey.*

"You're graciously allowing us to accompany you, is that it?"

Don glanced back to see Casey shrug, his mouth a smirk.

Leo bristled. "You listen to me, pal. We didn't sit in a closet for three months so that--"

"Don't play the suffering card on me--"

"I said listen, human!"

The last word more than the sharpness in Leo's tone stopped Casey's words. He blinked in surprise, mouth shutting.

Don looked back at Leo, a bit surprised himself. Another issue they'd have to work out?

Leo glowered at Casey. "We - and by *we* I mean my brothers and I - have claim on Bishop. It's as easy as that. We're the ones he hurt, and we're the ones who will see to it he doesn't hurt anyone else. Unless you can claim a wrong owed by Bishop, you'll back off and let us do what we came here to do."

Casey stared at him.

Leo turned.

"You're a self-centered shit sometimes, you know that?"

Leo snorted. "Sometimes I earn the right to be."

"You want to talk to me about wrongs done to me by that shithead in there? Fine. Want me to sit here and tell you stories about the time you guys were missing? About Splinter calling us every fucking hour on the hour wanting news? About April staying away days in a row trying to find some clue where you were? Out talking to Bishop's old cronies and students? You want me to tell you about patrolling the streets for so long at a time that I forgot what day it was?"

Don faced Casey, seeing the tightness around the man's eyes that hadn't been there weeks before. Casey was…he was like a human version of Raph's worst qualities. Violent and irresponsible to a fault.

Sincerity wasn't his strong point.

Casey's eyes stayed on Leo. "We worried for you guys for months. We fought and had nightmares and skipped meals and drove ourselves nuts worrying. I had to sit back and watch April blaming herself for you guys getting your asses caught. I got to watch

Splinter, that nuts old rat, turn from some wise old dude in a Bruce Lee movie into someone's scared daddy, just wanting to know where his kids were. You think we ain't been wronged by this guy too?"

"Casey, it's not…" Leo trailed off. He frowned over at Mike and Don.

Don shrugged.

"Face it, man. You pulled us into this weird-ass family of yours, now you gotta deal with us like family." Casey grinned. "And me? I get real violent when someone hurts family. You keep me from helping you and I'm gonna be all full of unsettled rage, and who knows how ugly things might get."

Leo rolled his eyes, but sighed. "Fine." He faced his brothers again. "We still need some kind of plan."

"Last time we were here he got us with gas through the sprinklers." Don looked out at the lawn before them.

Leo nodded. "So, we go one at a time. That way we have notice if there's anything like that still rigged up. What about inside the house?"

Don was thoughtful. "He only had the two men helping him. I'm sure they were hired hands."

"Yeah, one of 'em went to the cops. That was how Bishop first got arrested. It's also how we eventually tracked you guys down." Casey loped up to stand between Leo and Don, looking out at the house with mask back in place over his face.

Don blinked in surprise. Funny, but with April hardly coming by to see them they hadn't thought to ask how they were found. They were too lost in trying to recover.

"Which one?" Mikey's voice was low.

"Some Chinese kid. Loo or Law or--"

"Lau." Mike and Leo spoke together.

Don frowned at the house. What made Lau run to the cops? Maybe he finally grew enough conscience to be sicked by what they were doing to Raph. Maybe he just figured out that Bishop was a nutjob and likely to get them all tossed in jail. Maybe he wanted more money and turned on Bishop when he said no.

He'd have to research, go through the police records on the case. He didn't like mysteries.

"Figures," Mike said after a solemn pause. "Sanders enjoyed himself too much."

Don put a hand on his shoulder, feeling the tension in Mike's arm. "We end it here."

Mike nodded, grim eyes on the house. "Do you suppose Sanders is around?"

That was a thought that took Don aback. They came with a very specific purpose - to kill Bishop and put an end to his experiments for good. Sanders hadn't been part of the equation.

"We'll assume he's around somewhere." Leo straightened, turning to them. "Alright. Casey, you want to help so bad, you get to go across the booby-trapped lawn first. Let's not worry about subtlety. We'll get in, find him, and do what has to be done."

Don drew in a breath.

Leo held out ah and the moment Casey took a stop towards the yard. "We don't kill him right away," he said, his voice low. "I want to look him in the eye and tell him loud and clear why we're here."

Casey had learned a few things from his time spent with them. He crouched as he moved over the coverless lawn, silent and stealthy in

a way he hadn't been when they first met. His feet padded across the grass, taking him to the side of the house without incident.

He put his back to the wall, away from either window near him, and gestured.

Leo nodded Don out.

Don saw as he went the same small plastic pipes sticking up from the ground. Sure enough, though, he couldn't smell the chemical bite of chloroform, and he made it to Casey without a stir from the house.

Mike came next, and Leo, and when they all stood there Casey shifted to a window, staying to the side and pushing just enough to ensure it was locked. He glanced at Leo and reached into his bag, pulling out a bat.

Don looked around. The house was set pretty far from its neighbors, and there were no lights in any other house near them. No one listening.

Leo gave Casey the clear sign, and Casey straightened and swung his bat.

Don winced at the sharp ring of shattering glass, and as Leo and Mike moved past Casey to jump through the window he kept his eyes on the houses around them.

He shouldn't have been too surprised when nothing stirred. Nice burough and big houses and lawns aside, this was still New York. If anyone heard it they weren't about to get involved.

He moved last into the house, jumping through the frame. His feet crunched on broken glass, but nothing that cut through his calloused soles.

Leo and Mike were out of sight, and Casey was disappearing silently through the doorway of the dark bedroom they'd landed in and

towards the light in the front of the house.

Anticlimactic, Don thought again when he followed Casey to find Leo with his katana out.

Bishop stood as if genuinely surprised. There was tea on a table, an open book overturned on the floor at his feet.

But even as he held up his hands to show his harmlessness he gave that same studious smile. "I imagined you were dead."

Leo met his eyes, and with a glitter in his eye he spoke clearly and openly. "It would take more than you."

Bishop drew in a breath. "Ah."

"Yeah. We can talk. We could talk the whole time."

"I knew…" His eyes went to Casey. "And am I to return to the police? They've nothing to charge me with."

Casey twirled his bat, letting it smack into his open palm. "Sorry, pal. I ain't nothing like the police."

Bishop hesitated, looking back at Leo's grim eyes, and then to the two behind him.

Don stood by Leo's left shoulder, looking back impassively.

Bishop drew in a breath. "You want revenge."

"Is that a surprise?" Don spoke before he realized he was going to. "It's as human a response as you could have hoped for."

"Indeed." Bishop glanced to the side, then folded his arms and spoke almost casually. "There were four of you. Tell me, is the one I grew so fond of dead?"

"His name," Leo spoke through gritted teeth, "is Raphael. You never learned that with your experiments, did you?"

Bishop socked his head. "Then is Raphael--"

Leo's katana stretched, the tip less than a foot from Bishop's throat. "You know his name now. I didn't say you have the right to use it."

Bishop's hands lifted higher. Palms out and empty. Harmless, the gesture implied.

Don almost wanted to laugh. That man was as harmless as Leo's blade.

Instead he simply spoke, moving up to his brother's side, looking Bishop in the eyes. "Now you know. We speak, we think. We have names. Is there any chance at all that you regret what you did to us?"

Bishop looked at him, brow furrowing. "Regret? Why would I regret?"

Don shook his head. "You call yourself a scientist." It was a part of this entire ordeal Don had trouble reconciling. A man of science, devoted to learning, wasn't supposed to behave as Bishop did.

"Science has nothing to do with regret," Bishop answered, his hands lowering to his sides. "Had you simply spoken when I asked you to, we could have skipped the unpleasantries. The fault lies with you creatures."

Leo tensed against Don't side, but Don didn't pay him attention. "You would have simply put us through a different sort of unpleasantry. We're intelligent enough to know that."

"You might consider it that way. But I would also have shown the entire world that animals are capable of thought, of feeling. I would have changed the way the very earth is viewed."

"You're going to pretend you did this to help animals?" Mike's voice was oddly pinched. "How many have you murdered?"

"How many could I save?" Bishop's eyes shifted to the side again, maybe looking through the window to see if help was coming. Hoping the broken window had made someone alert police.

"You arrogant shit."

Don, annoyed by the man and his casual dismissal of their words, spoke over Leo. "A so-called man of science comes across four specimens unlike anything science has ever seen. What does he do? He finds out where they came from, and what made them different. He studies and learns. He doesn't strap them to tables and shock them until they muster up words for him."

"Every experiment proves something," Bishop answered, his eyes going back to Don. "Even if what it proves isn't what you wanted it to prove."

"Your experiments prove more about you than they ever could about your subjects."

"You're speaking about conscience, or morals?" Bishop studied Don. "Is that what this is? You think you can shame me into confessing my sins or shedding tears of regret?"

"A lot of people call you a genius," Don answered, his voice flat and his arms folded over his chest. "But all your life there was only one theory that mattered to you. With us you could have proven that theory, but you did absolutely everything wrong. Every word you spoke and every action you took drove us deeper into silence. I don't think you're a genius at all. I think you're just an overgrown version of a little boy who sets ants on fire with a magnifying glass."

Bishop was unaffected. "Almost every truly revolutionary scientific mind has been reviled in its day."

"You're no scientist." Leo was nearly thrumming with tension at Don's side. "You're a bully and a criminal, like a thousand we've faced before."

Bishop smirked and looked away from them, back towards the window. "Life preys upon life. This is biology's most fundamental fact."

"I've read that somewhere," Don said with a blink. "Martin Fischer."

"You read as well?" Bishop smiled, eyes coming back to Don.

Don sighed. It was a waste of time speaking to him. The true danger in Bishop was that he truly believed he was right. He believed he had done what he should have. And he would do it again. Over and over again.

Don shook his head and glanced at Leo. *Forget it. He won't listen.* But his eyes went back to Bishop. "We read. We think. We are no different than you, besides the obvious. And you tortured us for weeks without end."

"I did what I had to."

"You have no conscience."

Bishop laughed. "Science has nothing to do with conscience."

"Science without conscience is nothing. Just an ignorant man hacking away at something he doesn't understand." Don managed a wry smile. "Didn't Martin Fischer also say that of all the parasites on earth, man is the worst?"

Bishop glanced at the window again.

Don frowned, following his gaze. Everything was dark and still, but he kept looking out as if something were happening.

He tensed suddenly. "Leo--"

"Casey, check the window," Leo said over him, having seen the same thing Don did.

"On it." Casey moved around behind them.

Don pulled out his bo. Mike's nunchaku were already in his hands.

From outside came the sudden, sharp retort of gunfire.

Casey dropped to the floor instantly, but no bullet tore through the wall. Instead there was a thump, loud enough to carry inside, and then silence.

Casey moved in a crouch towards the window.

Don looked back at Bishop, seeing from his gleaming eyes that he had set them up again. But how?

Casey straightened suddenly and tried to push the window open. It didn't budge, so he growled and shattered the pane with his bat. Whatever was out there wasn't something Casey was scared of.

The gunshot would bring police. Don looked to Leo.

Leo met his eyes for a flinty moment and nodded.

But Casey spoke and grabbed their attention. "What the hell are you doing here?" He reached out through the window.

He pulled himself back in, gripping a green hand.

"Raph?" Mikey moved around Leo and Don.

Raph caught his feet inside the house. He was obviously weak, but in his free hand he clutched something tightly.

A revolver.

He ignored Mikey and looked at Bishop. "Your pal outside's still gonna be asleep when the cops get here."

The rasp in his voice and weakness in his stance brought it all back to Don - why they were there, over and above scientific debate and making a madman see reason.

Raph shrugged off Casey's hand. He lofted the gun, pointing, hardly wavering, at Bishop. "Got any last words?"

Don looked at Casey.

Casey gave a sharp nod and moved in on Raph.

Raph shoved his reaching hand away. "Fuck off, Casey! If someone's gonna do this, it's gonna be--"

"Raph!" Mikey spoke in a shout, almost like a warning.

That made Raph freeze, at the same time Casey darted in and grabbed his arms, pushing until the gun was turned. A sharp retort sent a bullet into the wall, and Raph recoiled and swayed.

Don didn't watch what happened next. All he knew was that Raph wasn't going to take anyone's life. Not that day, not in cold blood.

He turned to Bishop and moved.

And in the end, no one could be sure what exactly killed him. Don's bo cracked his skull hard enough to leave a recess, but Mikey's nunchaku crunched when it hit Bishop's throat. Of course, the sword pushed through his heart might have gotten him first.

They were never sure. But they stood, the three of them, and watched him crash to the ground. Eyes that he never allowed to see the truth leaked out light and life until they were dull as marble in his slack face.

The funny thing was, Don hadn't struck out of hatred, or even out of revenge. He knew in his heart that the man didn't deserve to live. He knew that by killing Bishop they had saved uncountable numbers of creatures from the same kind of torment they had suffered.

But he looked down at the heap on the ground and its dead eyes, and Don felt no relief in the act itself.

Murder in cold blood, Splinter might call it. The worst crime that could be committed.

But even Splinter thought this man needed to die.

Don watched almost impassively as Leo jerked his katana from the body. He looked at the dull red on the gleaming sword and felt nothing.

Leo used Bishop's own pant leg to wipe most of the red off the blade, and he pushed it back into its scabbard without expression.

But then he turned and moved past Don.

Don watched him, and saw that Raph had fallen to his knees, swaying, the gun on the ground in front of him.

A look out the window showed Don headlights, and a familiar van waiting on the street.

April. She must have driven Raph over. It was the only way he could have made it on his own.

Leo dropped to his knees in front of Raph. "Are you alright?"

Raph looked up, a strange boiling sort of emotion in his eyes. "Why did you do that? I had a right…"

Leo glanced back at Mike and Don. "It wasn't a right. It was murder, Raph. No matter what he did to us, he was unarmed and outnumbered, and we murdered him."

"You should have let me…"

"No." Leo bent close to Raph. "No. For the same reason you stood up and let them take you away all those times."

Raphael looked past Leo at Bishop. He shuddered.

Leo smiled and reached out, clasping Raph's arm. "We did it so you wouldn't have to."

Don felt the truth in those words. Bishop's murder in the end wasn't about revenge. It was about sparing Raph from becoming a murderer. It was about taking on the burden before Raph could carry it himself.

That's why he felt so dispassionate about it. And why he knew he wouldn't ever come to regret the act.

He moved slowly to his brothers.

Casey cleared his throat. "Hate to break up a moment, but we gotta jet before the cops get here."

Don held out a hand to help Raph up.

Raph stood but didn't move, eyes on Bishop before going to Leo, and Mike, and finally Donnie. "I…I don't…"

Don smiled. "It works both ways, Raph. You have to know that. We would have gone for you, too."

Mike came up on Raph's side, nudging his arm. "We'd do anything for you. You know that."

Raph drew in a breath.

Sirens became audible, wailing in the distance.

But they waited, patient.

Raph nodded finally. "Yeah. I guess I do know that."

Epilogue

"Hey. Hey! Raph!"

Brown eyes flew open, and clawed fingers seized around Leo's wrist. The scream cut off as Raph flew up into a sitting position. His eyes were round as saucers, his breathing hard.

Leo waited, not even wincing at the pressure on his wrist. He knew better than to bother with platitudes - 'everything's okay' was a condescending thing to tell someone who was obviously not okay.

He just went with the obvious. "Nightmare. It was a nightmare."

Raph's grip eased a little, and he looked past Leo. He slumped back. "Damn it."

"Hey, no worries." Mikey sounded like he was smiling. "Happens to the best of us."

Raph rubbed his eyes. "Sorry, guys. Didn't mean to wake you up."

"We were awake, actually." Don moved to the side and perched on the edge of Raph's bed. "I'm trying to design new wiring for alarm sensors outside the lair. I think Mikey's still catching up on his literature."

Mike grinned. "Casey dropped off a whole stack of X-Men I've missed the last few months."

Raph pried his fingers from Leo's wrist with a sheepish look. "What about you?"

Leo shrugged with a smile. "I was sleeping like a baby. Worn out from practice today."

Raph's expression hardened. "Jesus, you're gonna bring that up again, aren't you? You gotta be prissy because I wimped out an hour into it."

Leo rolled his eyes. "Stop being so defensive. Splinter said you could take your time."

"And I suppose the great Leonardo wouldn't need to take any time at all."

"Maybe, maybe not. I sure wouldn't be whining about it like a child at least."

From behind them Mike gave a gusty sigh loud enough to carry across the room. "I can't tell you how glad I am that things are back to normal," he said, his tone dry enough to chafe.

"Yeah, really. Goodnight, children."

Leo glanced back and saw the two younger brothers leaving the room. He sighed - maybe they had thought that getting back to normal would only bring back the good things. Life didn't really work like that, though.

Leo and Raph butted heads. It was as normal as eating pizza. They'd just have to get used to it again. Maybe it wasn't the ideal, but it was natural for them.

Hell, Leo even enjoyed it some of the time. It was like that old saying about pain - it meant that both of them were alive.

He sighed and looked back at Raph, but frowned when he saw Raph's hand over his shoulder, fingers moving back and forth absently over the split in his shell.

"Is that what you were dreaming about?" he asked quietly.

Raph blinked as if surprised he was still there. He looked down at his arm, and sighed. "Yeah." His voice was low, gruff. "Might've been the

worst moment of all of 'em."

Leo resisted the urge to touch his own shell in empathy. "You gonna be okay now?"

Raph nodded. "I'm good. Just, now and then…"

"You don't need to explain anything to me." He stood up, mouth stretching in a yawn. "Lemme know if you need anything."

"You'll be the third or fourth one I call, promise."

Leo made a face. "Jerk."

"Sissy."

"Wimp."

"Asshole."

Leo grinned. "Welcome back."

Raph bared his teeth. "Fuck off."

Leo obeyed, moving to the door.

"Hey."

He turned.

Raph sat there, hand still on his broken shell. His eyes met Leo's. "You know something?"

"What?"

"I'd do it again."

Leo frowned.

Raph shrugged. "Everything. If some new Bishop came along and I knew what was going to happen, down to this." He gestured at his shell. "I'd do it all again."

Leo hesitated, tapping his fist against the doorframe. He spoke finally, honest because Raph was being honest.

"Out of everything we went through - Bishop and the silence and nearly starving to death…out of everything, that's the one thought that scares me the most."

Raph smiled thinly. "Yeah. Me too." He lay back, eyes already heavy.

He'd sleep the rest of the night, Leo suspected. He usually did after a bad one like that. At least, if he did wake up from dreams again he woke quietly enough that no one heard.

They still had such a long ways to go, Leo knew. They'd be whole again, and were getting there as fast as anyone possibly could. But there was still a lot to work out. A lot that crowded their minds and stood between them as tangible as Bishop himself.

But they had time to put it all in its place. They could work it out as slowly as they had to.

With that thought - after all, that was the biggest miracle any of them could have asked for while being trapped in that room or on a metal table - Leo was able to return the smile.

"Goodnight, Raph."

Raph gave a half-asleep grin. "Night, asshole."

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end